The Unquiet Grave

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11099862.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham's Dogs, Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, Francis Dolarhyde, Beverly Katz, Abigail Hobbs, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Kade Purnell
Additional Tags:	Romance, Slow Burn, Mystery, Angst, Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Empath Will Graham, But not the kind of empath you'd expect, Manipulative Hannibal, Gaslighting, Psychologists & Psychiatrists, Possessive Hannibal, Obsessive Will Graham, Dark Will Graham, Someone Help Will Graham, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Hannibal is a Cannibal, Will Graham may just find out, Idk if the tags are working or not you'll have to tell me, Will Graham and Abigail become friends of sort
Language:	English
Collections:	Gonna Think On these, hannigram, hannigram :3, hannigram:reread
Stats:	Published: 2017-06-05 Completed: 2019-10-17 Words: 104,232 Chapters: 24/24

The Unquiet Grave

by LiaS0

Summary

Empath AU: Dreamers, Seers, Feelers

Will Graham has always been able to read minds. That is why he is part of a special organization within the FBI: The Empath Behavioral Analysis Unit, or EBAU for short. As an empath, he is at the government's disposal the hunt down the country's most terrifying of killers, all the while maintaining the barriers within his own mind. After a dangerous run-in with the notorious Minnesota Shrike, he is put on probation, tasked with being babysat by a therapist to better ensure his mental stability.

Hannibal Lecter, babysitter, isn't like other neurotypicals, though. Will can't read him the way he can anyone else. On his best of days, he'd almost call the good doctor interesting.

Romance, angst, thriller, mystery, slow burn, fantasy, obsession, and a disenchanted Will Graham.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

With Quiet Hands We Touch

Chapter 1:

Will Graham waits alone by the SUV until he's told that it's alright for him to enter the crime scene.

Jack Crawford's job is to make sure it's a 'safe space' for Will to enter, and no matter how many times Will explains that that makes no fucking sense, the rules remain. Empaths on the scene of a fresh crime have a tendency to vomit, to collapse from the sensations, and no one is going to take a risk with him, no matter how resilient he is. While a normal Seer-empath boasts an ability to see the realities that occur around them, a Feeler can touch and gain impressions from tactile feel, and a Dreamer can recreate, Will Graham is a special blend of all three, the shining star of the Empath-Behavioral-Analysis-Unit. A rare, somewhat mentally stable E-3. They don't want him tarnished, not when he's so damn good at what he does.

If he wasn't so strung out, he'd have felt almost cherished at the thought they gave him, to cradle him like a fragile little teacup meant only for the best of after dinner sit-downs over lady fingers and a cup of French press.

He rubs his palms together, stares down at his familiar, worn pair of standard, FBI-edition leather gloves. They block the sensations of touch, keep the worst of the world at bay. They've been his constant companions for the last five years, helped him through the thick of things. There is a fray on one of the seams, and he notes that it'll need fixed soon. It wouldn't do for a seam to come undone and accidentally expose him to anything.

When he hears footsteps, he glances to them, then to the hands clenched into fists swaying beside a stiff spine and a taut stance. It's not a pretty crime scene, and Will can see it before he's even been inside.

"How many?" he asks.

"Just the wife, but it's bad. RA and daughter are missing."

RA and daughter are missing. Will lets those words roll around in his mind, lets them settle. He can imagine the fear, the terror on her face as she's hauled about, nothing more than the weight of her skin and her bones as she cries. He's panicked, Will thinks, but he's not stupid. He's desperate, but he'll still have fight in him.

He stands up, adjusts his glasses and heads into the house.

It is bad, just like Jack Crawford promised. Blood trails from the entryway towards the kitchen, and as he walks in he's given wide, respectful berth. His regular team waits in the entry to the kitchen, and he notes Beverly's grim smile of encouragement as he steps in and looks around, inhaling the tangy aftertaste of mortal terror and betrayal.

The mother's there, just like Jack promised. She lies in a pool of blood, throat cut open to expose everything within, and Will stares down at her for a time, studying her. Impressions of her life do not lay in her corpse, but the final moments of her death does. He hunches down, head tilted as he removes his glasses and studies her in sweeping, smooth motions. His gaze pauses on her throat, on her shoulder. He tastes pain, fear, fury, and a longing that claws so deep he wants to cry out with it.

He steadfastly refuses.

Instead, he meticulously removes his gloves and tucks them into his coat pocket, reaching down in order to grasp her shoulder and her neck, the spaces that seem to light up moreso than the rest of her, begging him to just *touch*.

It is all at once, a rushing, choking, cloying pain, the sensations rippling like the water right before a tidal wave. They twist, curl, red hot and furious, and blood pools around like rivers of hatred, of disdain.

Will ignores the sensations, the feeling of her death. It is a difficult thing to ignore, but he focuses instead on the feelings that surround her, that led to her final moments, the light ethereal that held death with such tender malevolence.

You are nothing, but you will give me time. You will give me time, you will give me an escape, and the many years I've endured you, endured your cutting glances, your knowing stares will finally come to an end.

It is time for you to come to an end. You've served your purpose. This is my design.

Will jerks back with a hiss of breath, and he stares down at her, pulling hands away quickly. The aftermath of her emotions, of *his* emotions rings through each pulse of his heart, and he gulps in air as he looks around, trying to ground himself. The sink is a good place, and he stares at it until his breath can come without burning, until he can calm his steady heart.

It doesn't want to calm, though. Not when it's found a trail.

He sees it, glowing imprints of the one that no longer remains. Just as the Shrike placed hands upon his wife's shoulder before he took her life, so too can Will see the glowing imprints of a hand to the edge of the sink, dragging along the counter before making its way to the doorway just across from them, leading outside.

Will knows where to go.

He follows the trail, stumbling over a fallen rain boot before catching himself, hands fumbling with the doorknob until he's outside, gulping in the fresh afternoon air of fall, cold and rejuvenating in his lungs. He inhales the trail, looks around and spies that same glow, that same light that moves first left than right. He bends down, touches his palm to the footprint, and like a jolt from touching a live wire, he senses purpose, determination. Alongside it, stumbling and whimpering, he senses mortal terror. The daughter is alive.

The daughter is alive.

He isn't aware that he's running until he slips down a small incline on fallen leaves and has to catch himself, fingers pressing to the earth. He senses the startled jump of a doe not an hour before, the slither of a snake through underbrush ten minutes ago, and his hands are up again, pumping as he stares at the golden trail, ignoring a shout in the distance, ignoring the sense that something terrible is going to happen.

It's two miles out before he finds what he's looking for, and when he does relief is only the mildest of balms. The cabin has the same sense, the same aura, and he opens the door to it, pleased with the way the hinges do not squeak, do not betray him. He steps in, the air within just as fresh as the outside, and he knows this is no place that sits abandoned for too long. He sees the man's essence on every surface, in every nook and cranny. He is here often, this place he's made into a fortress.

A creak upstairs distracts him, and he looks up to the sound of scuffling feet. There is a quiet, despairing sob, and he's up the stairs, feet carrying him fast, breath puffing with a burning need before he rounds the corner and comes face-to-face with the man he's tracked, the man he so easily found because *of course* he'd find him when they were one in the same.

"P-please," the girl whimpers, and Will's hands find their way to his gun, drawing it up to level at the man before him. His head is bowed, his mouth is moving, and when a hand shifts near her neck, Will Graham does not hesitate.

First one, then two more. The Shrike does not fall back, merely wrenches his arm to the side, and blood spurts from her neck, an arc of color catching in the light from the window with a dazzling array. At the action, another two shots, then five more as he doesn't seem to realize that he's been shot, that people that have been shot should fall down and die. At the tenth round hitting his flesh, he finally manages to fall, body hitting the sturdy oak floor with the sound only a dead body can make.

Will rushes to the girl, drops to his knees beside her. Blood gushes from her neck, pooling in a sickening design about her, and without thought he puts his hands to her neck, gripping tightly to try and staunch the flow.

It is the wrong thing to do.

He isn't aware that he is screaming until the screams stop and his ears burn with the aftermath. Her skin is raw, and his skin is peeling back, blood gushing down his neck as each heartbeat takes them closer and closer to the end, to the place where time is nothing because they're ultimately nothing. He can't see, he can't *see*, and it isn't until he's wrenched away from her body that he realizes anyone else is even in the room.

"Will, *Will*," someone urges, and hands pat at his jacket, withdraw his gloves from his pocket. He isn't aware of the actions though, merely the sensation of what it is to die and die afraid, terrified of the one you love most in the entire world. His breaths choke, are wrenched from him, and it isn't until gloves are slid onto his shaking hands that he's able to gain some semblance of control over himself.

He curls into a ball on the floor where he shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and he presses his hands to his eyes as he sobs.

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He's not allowed inside of Abigail Hobbs' hospital room, so he sits outside. Beside him, Dr. Alana Bloom waits with him, as patient as a tulip bulb in winter.

"You're not in trouble," she assures him, not for the first time.

Will says nothing. His throat is hoarse from the screaming.

"Your quick actions saved her life, and no one is going to ignore that. No matter what happens, you saved her life."

"I felt him die," Will manages after a prolonged sort of quiet that rubs against his skin wrong. He rubs his neck, studies an ugly black scuff mark on the tiled floor. "I can feel everyone dying inside of this hospital."

"Do you need your medicine?"

He shakes his head, slumps further in his chair. The medicine quiets things, but it makes him lethargic, too numb to function right. Each blink of his eyelids is a gunshot, each breath a jerk of shoulders as Garrett Jacob Hobbs takes a hit.

"He was a RA, and you did your job," she says, and Will has to cling to those words. *You did your job*.

"I did my job," he says, and there is a bleak, sinister sneer to his lips.

"I know being an empath isn't easy –I'll never know what you're going through," Alana says kindly. "Just know that you're supported by everyone on your team, and we're going to help you through this."

He wants to snort, to bite back with something snarky, but he can't bring himself to. No matter what anyone says, from the Seer-empath he shared a room with for all thirteen years of his education to the Feeler-empath he trained with at the academy, Will Graham is utterly and painfully aware of just how not easy it is to be someone like him. Dr. Bloom says it to comfort herself just as much as she's trying to comfort him. There's no one in the world like Will Graham, and Will Graham fucking knows it.

Long after Alana leaves, he stands up, shrugs his coat on and heads for the exit, gloves tugged taut over fingertips that still recall the feeling of Abigail Hobbs' blood.

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He's found a week later at his home in Wolf Trap, blinds closed and dogs roaming restlessly in the front room. He lays sprawled alongside a boat motor, gloves on, and he tinkers with it, fumbling over the feeling of a faulty fan and a piss poor belt.

"I finished the paperwork on the case," Jack says, sitting down at Will's desk. He doesn't ask before he sits, and Will doesn't offer.

“Good.”

“Despite you not following empath protocol, you’re still in active duty. The director was more than willing to be understanding about an E-3 losing themselves to the sensations and following those rather than the rules. She’s given an informal warning.”

He grunts, puts his shoulder into the turning of a screw, pleased when it loosens and drops into his waiting palm.

“I guess the question is whether or not you want to be back in active duty, Will,” Jack continues when he gets no reply. “No call, no e-mail; you’d might as well have dropped off of the face of the earth. How are you doing out here?”

“Better question is how you’re doing without me,” Will replies, and he won’t look at Jack. He can already sense it in the air, a feeling of need, of words unsaid but wanting to be shared. He doesn’t want to go down that road. It’d been nice to only feel the base, pure needs of the dogs around him that want nothing more than his love. It’s been better therapy than whatever doctor is waiting for him at the bureau to evaluate his psyche, a walnut that cracks under pressure.

“Make no mistake, we need you. I’ve already got another case with your name on it, but that’s nothing if your head’s not in the game.”

Will holds back a smile that’s more of a gritting of teeth. His head’s never been in the game, too lost as it was in the thoughts of another, the ideals of someone just across the room. Jesus, he can’t even look at a person without seeing their heart’s desires, their thoughts laid bare, and Jack thinks he’s at some point been in the saddle, let alone faced the right direction?

“You ever read what it does to a feeler to kill someone, Jack?” he asks.

“I’ve read about it,” Jack says evenly. “I had to pass several courses before I was even considered for my position at the EBAU.”

“They’re both the killer and the killed. It’s in their skin, their cells, their brain; a feeler once dropped dead, heart stopped after they killed someone in self-defense. A thinker has the sensation that they’re the ones being killed, and they can go into a coma. A seer has been said to have visions of their own death in the face of taking another’s life. With me-”

“You got a mix of all three,” Jack finishes for him. “Dr. Bloom said you’re not coping well.”

“I’m not fucking coping at all,” Will retorts. He sounds angry so that he doesn’t sound so god damn afraid. “I’m not…I’m not coping.”

He’s not coping. In his dreams, he’s standing behind Abigail Hobbs, slitting her throat with a devilish hunger and a sadistic smile. When he wakes, he thinks that maybe he should just finish the job after all. He thinks of how his own neck felt, splitting open as hers did, and it quells the thought nicely. Sometimes he wakes and feels as though he’s dead, as though he never were.

“She referred me to a doctor that has worked with empaths and comes highly recommended, Will,” Jack says. “I spoke with him, and he’s willing to talk to you, maybe help with some of the thoughts in your head.”

“No therapists,” Will snaps.

“If you just-”

“Since I was five-years-old I’ve had doctors climbing in and out of my head, Jack,” Will warns him, and he pokes his head out from around the motor to scowl at his pant leg. “No therapists. I’ll come in on Monday.”

Jack wants to argue, and Will glances to his shoulder, noting the tense set of it. This isn’t an easy conversation for Jack any more than it is for Will. Neither one of them share emotions well, let alone conveyed in a way others can wholly understand.

“Thanks for coming,” he adds, to sound congenial. It’s also a dismissal.

“If you’re not in by Monday, I’m sending the doctor to you,” Jack warns.

It’s a fair warning, and Will’s silence shows his compliance. Jack sees himself out, and Will sets his tools down, laying sprawled out beside the motor, chest heaving with the thought of having to go out and *look* at people after a week of blissful solitude. Buster crawls onto his chest, lays there, and he absentmindedly pets him, still gloved because if there’s one thing he’s learned in this world, it’s that even the pure emotions of a dog against his bare skin is enough to rend his mind in two.

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He shows up on Monday because he knows Jack’s threat is real. He’d scrounged through his closet, found his least wrinkled plaid, belt cinched tight because a week of bad eating habits –rather, of no eating habits –has dropped a few pounds off of him. In Jack’s office he accepts a file after he’s signed a form saying that he in no way blames EBAU for what happened, that he takes full responsibility for his actions.

Then he sits in a room with other empaths somewhat like him and listens to them talk.

A Feeler’s gloves ripped at a crime scene and he thought he’d been stabbed, leading to an anxiety attack that took him out of work for a week. Will listens to his bumbling mouth form words, taking them back to that moment, and in their own way everyone in the room is there with him, being stabbed as well. The Seers avoid looking at him, Dreamers try and hear the words and those alone, compartmentalizing their thoughts before they can become nightmares, and Will gnaws on his bottom lip, focusing on the tactile feel of his new gloves, issued to him after he showed Jack the ripped thread. No sense in having what happened to the guy three seats down happen to him. Not after he’d already had his own special blend of breakdowns.

“Agent Graham, you recently returned after something similar,” the director prompts. “Would you like to share?”

Although he doesn't have to see a doctor, there is a Director of Empath Agents that has full reign of the empath program in the FBI, and he does have to report to her. After a stint like his, there's a slew of group meetings, sharing, and comforting one another with a special, potent vibe of an organization much like Alcoholics Anonymous, minus the coffee bar in the back. It's better than a psychoanalysis, though. At least with these, he normally has to just show up and do his time. Most people, other empaths included, give him a wide berth and leave him well enough alone, the way he wants.

Will glances to Director Hansen's shoes, jaw working furiously. "…I empathize with his struggles," he says dryly.

Everyone in the group laughs, except for the director.

"This is an exercise meant to make you more comfortable with returning to work. It's a support system so that you know you're not alone," Director Hansen says. She's not impressed with his joke, and he can feel her displeasure on his skin like muggy Florida humidity. "It's also a requirement that you participate so that I can sign off and support you back into the field."

"I'm not feeling well," he decides, and he stands up, walking out of the room. He'll get a sign off from someone else later, from someone that isn't a director of empath agents, someone that's not in charge of babysitting the lot of them so that some higher-paid neurotypical can keep them all in line and feel good about themselves.

He pauses by the small vending machine, kicks it idly and feeds it a crumpled dollar. He snatches up the bag of trail mix from the bottom, as well as a candy bar long forgotten by someone else, and he paces along a wall displaying the photos of empaths fallen in the line of duty.

Half of them fell due to a potent blend of self-destructive habits and suicide, but they don't share that part in the FBI tours. He recognizes some of them as the Rogue Agents he aided the FBI in tracking down.

"Lost in your thoughts?" someone asks. Will refuses to look over at them, taking a huge, unsightly bite of the candy bar, a little disappointed that someone abandoned a 100 Grand rather than a 3 Musketeers. Maybe that's why it was abandoned. No one really *enjoyed* a 100 Grand candy bar, they simply made due because that's all that was there.

"Yes."

"I imagine that happens often, given the way a Dreamer thinks."

Will doesn't bother to correct him –he's not a Dreamer, he's an E-3, something far worse, far less stable than a Dreamer.

"Thoughts lending to a less tasty side of the world, no matter where you point your gaze."

“I build forts,” he says. The person draws close but leaves a respectable distance, the way everyone does. There are no laws saying you can’t impose on an empath’s personal space, but there’s an unwritten, tacit rule that you just don’t get too close unless you want them knowing your deepest, darkest secrets like it was common knowledge.

“Nightmares rise quickly in your line of work, I’d imagine.”

“So do forts.”

“Forts are not so effective when you incidentally lock the monsters inside, though,” the man says, and Will lets out an unattractive, ugly snort before looking over at him, gaze pinned to his pocket square in a loud shade of yellow. He doesn’t dare look at his face. He doesn’t want to see.

“Are you trying to psychoanalyze me?” he demands, glaring at the offensive color. “Did Director Hansen send you after me? Agent Crawford?”

“Do you feel psychoanalyzed?” the man asks. Out of Will’s peripheral, he sees neatly combed hair in enough shades of blonde to be confusing, a strong jaw and cheekbones sharp enough to cut. His expression is placid, calm in the face of Will’s annoyance.

He takes another bite of the 100 Grand, talks around it in his mouth. “You can ask anyone else here, no one likes to see me psychoanalyzed.”

“You’re speaking as though I should know who you are,” the man says. “I’m merely making conversation.”

“Bull shit,” Will retorts. “Lies are about as easy to see as acne. You know who I am.”

“Can you see my lies?” the man wonders. His clipped, smooth accent dips and lowers as his cadence slows. “If you looked at me now, would you see my lies as a Seer would?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

The taunt is just needling enough that Will glances to his eyes, an easy enough feat when they’re the same height. Eyes reveal all, and Will Graham has seen enough eyes to learn to hate them, resent them for the secrets they hold that he’s never wanted to know. The place the iris meets to the pupil is the ugliest of all because he always feels like he’s falling into them, going to a place where the labyrinth of the mind falls away, leaving him with hands black with tar and a stomach churning from the dark. He always sees a person’s darkness first before he can see the good, and it’s always bad enough, always bleak enough that no matter how much good offsets the evil, he can’t find his way out. He’s trapped, and he can only see the monsters.

How surprising for him, then, when looking into eyes the color of aged blood, he sees nothing at all.

He thinks to look away, eyes watering, but he can't bring himself to. He's stunned at the absolute *nothing* that he sees, the emptiness of a void like there is no person beneath. The man stares back at him, meeting his unsteady, wavering stance with an assurance of someone that knows the thoughts racing through his mind, having probably heard it for a long, long time from many others.

I can't see him, Will thinks to himself, dazedly. *I can't hear him. It's like there's nothing there at all.*

"…What are you?" Will says out loud. If the man is offended by the question, he doesn't show it. He isn't breaking Will's dumbfounded, open stare either, staring right back with equal frankness.

"I am Dr. Hannibal Lecter," he says lightly, extending his hand. "I'd like to have a conversation with you, if at all possible. I think I may be of some help."

And Will, unable to help himself, spellbound by a face that doesn't crowd his mind and make the demons crawl inside, reaches out and shakes his hand. He coughs to dispel a pressure building in his chest, something threatening to burst, and he nods dumbly.

"…Alright. Let's talk."

With Blurry Eyes We See

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2:

They find a space outside where the air is cold but Will can have something to set his gaze on that's not the eggshell white walls of the FBI. He's passed a coffee from the visitor's center, and he grips the cardboard cup tightly, almost threatening to pop the top off with his strangle-like hold. Occasionally, he sneaks glances to the man beside him in an odd blue suit with a yellow tie matching his pocket square, but he is just as silent, mind just as unbending. Will sees it much like a great stone wall, something he can press his palm to but ultimately see nothing behind.

Is this what it's like for everyone else? He wonders. *Is this how wonderful it is to be someone nothing like me?*

"Dr. Bloom and I have worked together many times, so when she called me asking for a favor, I was obliged to help," Dr. Lecter says, crossing one leg over another. He rests an expensive, wool coat over his lap, not quite cold enough to need to put it on. Will studies the smooth fibers of it and bobs his head, peeking down to their shoes. Beside Will's faded, questionable dress shoes the product of far too many years uncared for, his are immaculate, nary a crease in the lining of them.

"She is the prying type," he replies, not unkind. Alana Bloom is the result of a friendship bred of her fascination with his mind but her refusal to disrespect him by prying. She works frequently with the EBAU, more often than not in order to keep an eye on him by request of Director Hansen, the DEA.

"She informed me that you were an E-3, a rare demographic of empaths," he says. "I'd heard of their existence but it was more of a rumor within the psychiatric field than anything else."

"There are five known E-3's in the world, and four of them are in psychiatric hospitals," Will replies. The words are bitter, and they leave a feeling on his tongue like he's bit into the skin of an apple that hadn't been washed of its waxy residue. He tongues the roof of his mouth, frowning.

"You're not."

"I'm not," Will agrees. "That's because I was discovered before I could have a complete psychotic break and go into a comatose state."

"The institute that they train and educate empaths at is here in DC, isn't it?" Dr. Lecter asks.

“There’s one here, one in Nevada, and one in Washington.”

Dr. Lecter nods and stares out at the courtyard where trees shed their leaves, stains of red among russet ocher and golden delicious yellow. Will watches the breeze pull more leaves from a branch, tracks its spiraling movement before it settles to the ground to rest. He blows air out of the side of his mouth.

“Why can’t I see you?” he asks when Lecter doesn’t pry for anything more. He chances another glance to his eyes –nothing. There’s absolutely nothing.

“They did several scans on my brain quite a long time ago to try and ascertain why there seems to be a block within my mind that prevents empaths from seeing anything. There is a foreign wave that throughout much of my years in university they studied, but it’s ultimately come to nothing. A unique outlier, someone that Seers cannot see and Dreamers cannot broach the psyche of to grow thoughts within their own mind.”

“What about Feelers?”

“Feelers, with direct skin contact, can certainly gain impressions.” Lecter glances to the gloves on Will’s hands, snug against his skin, a thin and supple leather for every day wear. “Although after your last encounter with physical touch, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I don’t have physical contact with anyone if I can help it,” Will replies. “…It was an accident.”

“A burst of adrenaline in the heat of the moment, your desire to save a life far more paramount than your own survival. The fact that you only went into shock rather than die is a credit to the strength of your mind,” Dr. Lecter compliments kindly. “Given that you are an E-3, I am doubly impressed that such contact, skin to skin, eye to eye, mind to mind, was met with your blunt refusal to do nothing more than live.”

“What does Dr. Bloom hope you can do for me?” Will asks. He chances another look, stares at Lecter in profile, the surprise just as powerful now as it was before, when he’d first looked.

“Ensure that you don’t internalize your experience to the point that at any given point in time, you either lash out at yourself or someone else.”

“They think I’m a suicide risk?” His lip curls at the thought, derisive.

“Aren’t you?”

By general consensus, all empaths are a suicide risk due to the statistics of depression and suicide rampant within those cursed with the ‘gift’, but Will doesn’t want to say that. He doesn’t like thinking about it, let alone talking about it.

“Therapy doesn’t work on me, Dr. Lecter,” he says instead, redirecting. He watches another leaf fall into the already large pile at the base of the trunk. Someone will have to rake them up soon.

"Why?"

"I know the tests, I know the tricks. My work at the FBI required a thorough study of psychology, apart from my training with my empathy. It'd be a waste of time for you and me, and if there's one thing people tend to care about, it's wasted time." Among other things, like a wasted life, a wasted breath. A wasted death.

"Then I certainly don't suggest therapy," Lecter says gravely. His agreement with Will is surprising; most people urge him to set aside his concerns, get over himself and get the help that he truly needs. He can't explain to them how he can't quiet his mind enough to do the exercises, that the tricks and tests are obvious enough to him that he knows the words to avoid, the things to say to get what he wants rather than the things he needs.

"Thank you," Will says, relieved. That's twice in one day he's surprised by this man. There's something almost exhilarating in the fact.

"Instead, I would suggest that we have conversations."

"Conversations." And there it goes. Flat. Blunt. Unimpressed.

"To my understanding, half of the struggles of an empath is the sense that they are trapped within their own mind, victim to the sensations that their brain waves cause due to the attunement they have to mankind around them. Sometimes, all one needs is another person to share such thoughts with, so that they don't fester inside."

He sounds utterly serious in his explanation, like what he's suggesting should come easy to someone like Will Graham. He wants to laugh, but he doesn't. Instead, he sighs, tilting his head back to look up at the sky.

"Jack Crawford tells me that you have a particular knack for the monsters," Lecter continues when Will doesn't reply. "Not all empaths do, but you do."

"It's an active imagination coupled with my abilities."

"And that active imagination, coupled with your abilities, allowed you to save the life of someone who is now in a stable condition. If you hadn't helped Abigail Hobbs by killing Agent Hobbs, she'd be in far worse shape –dead."

Will doesn't see it that way. His hands flex, shake, and he recalls the sensation of his neck tearing, parting with ease like one would filet a fish –a smooth, swift slashing motion before the blood begins to pour, greedy with every heartbeat.

Maybe if he could just *see* her alive, it'd be enough to quiet the screaming inside?

"I don't think conversations are what I want, either," he says at last, standing up. A breeze turns, tugs at his jacket. "I gotta hand it to you, you threw me off at first. That doesn't happen very much. I'm good at knowing people." He peeks at his face once more, nodding to himself at the silence. Odd, he thinks, but it's an outlier, and he will find enough ways to

research the phenomenon he's never come across before without having to talk to someone to do it.

"I'd apologize for it, but I'm not entirely sorry," Lecter says, standing as well.

"At least you're honest."

"I try to use terminology such as that sparingly, to not sully it with overuse."

"That's fair," Will replies, and he thinks to maybe shake his hand since most people shake hands in situations like this. He can't, though. Even gloved, a small, whispering fear lurks that it will not be enough protection, and he'll be back in a cabin in the woods with a neck wound that's bleeding out. Jack would have a field day, and Director Hansen would find a way to set him off to the side on the bench for the rest of his career.

He firmly decides not to shake his hand.

"I would ask that you at least consider my offer; even a simple conversation can make a difference between standing on stable ground and feeling like one is too close to the edge," Hannibal says. He doesn't try to extend his hand.

"No thank you." Will heads towards the door, and he pauses when he doesn't hear Lecter follow. "…Now that I know what I wanted to know about you, I don't find you that interesting."

The door is closing behind him when he hears Hannibal say, twenty shades of amused, "You will."

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It was a lie, of course. Will Graham finds Hannibal Lecter very, *very* interesting.

He's on the internet, not socially, but through published works discussing the phenomenon of his mind completely rejecting Seers and Dreamers. It was only through a Feeler putting a hand on him that he said he gained the impression of immense sadness and grief, and Lecter had admitted in the study of thinking of his long dead sister at the time. The Feeler hadn't been able to see Lecter's sister, vivid in his mind, but he'd merely gained the impression of sadness. Grief speaking of years of loss, something aged.

There was an odd brain pattern that they detected through numerous scans, but after compiling the data, he ultimately left the study so that he could return to his own education. A man of medicine who worked as a surgeon before ultimately switching to psychiatry and establishing a practice.

It's during short breaks that he reads several published pieces in journals, Beverly's tablet in one hand, a mildly shriveled clementine in the other. There have been studies specifically from where he grew up, Lithuania, studies in males with certain eye colors, certain builds, certain behaviors. So far, in the psychological world, Hannibal Lecter is the only one like this.

Much like Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter is unique, too.

He's distracted from his hunger for information and from his clementine by work, though. Jack Crawford spoke with Director Hansen, and it seemed that he didn't need a sign off from her after all. He can go back to hunting Rogue Agents, agents of the FBI whose empathy grew so burdensome that they snapped.

The man he sits across from is older, greying and bespectacled, hair that was once blonde giving way to age. He is twitchy, and Will notes hands that clench, grip, and clasp before he focuses on the edge of his glasses so that he doesn't have to see. He's not a RA brought before Will, but a simple warm-up, a test from Jack to see just how he does after a mere week of rest after Hobbs.

"Mr. Stammets, do you know why you're here?" he asks.

"Yes." Although his body betrays his unease, his mild disconnect, his voice is steady and sure. A pharmacist, one used to dealing with confused and unsure patients.

"You're wanted in conjunction with the disappearance of several men and women that were found buried in shallow graves with sugar water being fed via intravenous fluids. You claim no such knowledge, although an unconscious woman was found in the trunk of your car."

"I didn't do it, I didn't," he presses, and Will nods. It's that declaration of innocence that caused him to be brought into the room.

"Do you know who I am, Mr. Stammets?"

"I don't."

"I'm Agent Will Graham of the EBAU." It's his name that coins recognition; having studied medicine in school, Eldon Stammets would know everything there was to know about empaths. He stares at Will, and a slow, sorrowful resignation takes over. Seconds tick slow on the watch face on Will's wrist.

"…It's over then, isn't it?" he finally asks, and his hands that once twitched jerk about as he begins to drum them on the table to dispel anxious energy. "They had a legal sign-off allowing you to come in here, so you're going to know everything."

"I'm going to know everything," Will agrees, and *God* sometimes he wishes he didn't.

He doesn't have to remove his gloves to touch; looking into Stammets' eyes give him everything, and he removes his glasses so that there are no barriers, nothing to keep them apart. When he looks up to Stammets' suddenly terrified face, he meets his eyes and falls in, tumbling over and over and over until he lands on his hands and knees beside mounds of dirt, the soil beneath him rich and decadent with fertilizer and life that grows with wild abandon.

It is a need, and it grasps, reaches. We are not all this, beings of flesh and bone, but something spanning a greater time, a time when all there was was the sensations of living, of being alive. We reached, and in reaching we were touched, connected, and god that's all I've ever wanted, was to connect.

He pulls himself from the stream of thought, from the need that makes his throat dry and his hands shake. He's never been able to connect, never been able to reach and be reached in return, and he stands from his crouched position, brushing dirt from his pants.

Beside him, there is a shovel. He picks it up and turns, studying the comatose man whose hands are laid at his sides, at peace with what is happening to him –at least, that is what he tells himself.

Mechanically, Will Graham turns and begins to toss dirt on him, starting from feet and working his way up. There is a detached, clinical side of him that grazes over the image, pausing at the tube inserted into his mouth so that he can breathe, then the tubes that are inserted with precision and practice at his arm. Alongside this grave, there are eight others much like it, and that is when the feelings of excitement, *pride* emerge. They know he is here.

They know he is here.

Will Graham pulls himself from the image, and in his mind it is a lurching sensation where he has to physically rip himself from the shreds of the memory, slamming a barrier in place before he can fall back in. In reality, his wide, unblinking eyes suddenly blink once, then rapidly to wet them. His hands clench, unclench in his lap, and he stares at Stammets' nose so that he doesn't crawl back into his gaze. His breath is curt, short.

"They know you are there," he tells Stammets, connected to one part of a whole.

"They know you are there," Stammets agrees, and at the sense of connection to Graham, he bows his head in relief.

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He sits across from Jack at his desk, file in hand.

"You haven't gone to see Dr. Lecter?"

"We met." Will props his chin up with a gloved hand, turning a paper aside to stare at a photo. He keeps going back to Stammets, then back to Hobbs. He blinks, and Hobbs doesn't just fall with one shot –why did he have to shoot so many god damn times?

"And?" Jack prompts when Will doesn't continue.

"I think I can deal with it in my own way," he says, turning another photo over. The fungi reach, and he wants to reach back. "I don't need a therapist to do it."

"Director Hansen informed me that sending you back without making you open up will only subject you to a further troubled psyche. She said you can't properly hunt RA's after the last one ending like it did."

“I need the repetition of work,” he replies. He wants it to sound firm, but it comes out more like a request. “My work is what’s normal to me, so for her to try and take it away will do more damage than good, I think.”

Jack wants to argue that, but in reality his work is made all the easier because of Graham, so he decides not to fight it. Will can sense the see-saw of emotion before resolution sets in.

“Did you know that mycelium can actually sense when you come near?” Will asks. He glances up from the file to focus on the paper weight on Jack’s desk. “Their spores reach out to you. You think you enter a glade without wildlife and you’re alone, but they know you are there.”

“His confession means a faster court trial, and with your testimony on it, he’ll go away for a long, long time,” Jack says. That’s why they have empaths in crime units.

“Hobbs thought of his victims as his daughters, but he was a hunter. In his own way, to stomach gutting them and grinding their bones, he probably also saw them as deer, as any other animal.” He goes to bite a nail, lips pausing at the glove firmly on his hands. It’s a rule that during work hours, those don’t come off until it’s time for application of his talents. Stammets wished so dearly to connect that he didn’t even have to use his hands. “Deer step soft in the underbrush so they don’t break the blades of grass and disturb anything. They know the mycelium is there, and it knows they’re there. In a way, Hobbs thought of the girls as his daughter, and as deer. In a way, Hobbs targeted people that were so attuned and connected that they could walk into the forest and know you were there, and in knowing, knew the mycelium knew as well.”

“The girls were deer?” Jack asks, confused.

“The girls were his daughter, but in a way they were deer,” Will says impatiently. “And deer don’t want to harm the ecosystem. They have more cares to connections than we do. That’s why Stammets buried us. So we could all connect.”

“…Take a walk,” Jack suggests.

Will takes a walk.

He finds himself at the hospital where Abigail Hobbs rests, and he sits down on the bench outside of her room since they still won’t let him in. It’s logical, he reasons, that they won’t let him in. Although he is a FBI agent, she isn’t awake for questioning, and there’s no reason he’d need to trounce about her room with a file open containing photos of her father’s case.

The Minnesota Shrike, caught at last.

Will stares down at his display, ten shots along his stomach, chest, and shoulders. They’re a pretty centered spread, considering his panic and his fear –he knows part of that panic and fear was Abigail’s seeping into the air, but it does nothing to lessen the severity of it. Seeing the image makes him think of how quick he’d been to kill rather than subdue. Most

empaths aren't allowed to carry firearms, but after a series of tests and evaluations, he was deemed worthy of it.

Seeing how many shots it took to drop Hobbs, he was going to have to change to a far more powerful gun.

It's not the first Rogue Agent he's tracked, but it's by far the worst. Will Graham's specialty in the FBI isn't so much his empathy as it is his ability to use his empathy to keep other agents in line. Empaths working in any form of the government are trained under the FBI's fierce regiment to control their gifts and are considered 'agents' of some way, shape, or form –in the almost inevitable turn of their mind, when barriers fall and the empath experiences a psychotic break, it's Will Graham that steps in and tracks them before they can hurt anyone.

Agent Garrett Jacob Hobbs waded his way through eight girls and one wife before Will managed to find him.

"Agent Graham, she's ready for you."

He looks up at the nurse holding a small clipboard, confused. Her stance isn't wavering, her mark clear. She knew exactly who to speak to, what to say. Rather than question it, he nods, clears his throat and stands up, glancing about the hallway, seeing no one to tip him off to what's happened.

"Thank you," he says slowly. He follows her no-nonsense walk into Abigail Hobbs' room like this was his plan all along, like he hadn't planned to lurk outside of her room until it was verging on weird and distinctly not okay.

Hannibal Lecter is waiting inside, and that's all he needs to know.

"Agent Graham," he says, and he thankfully doesn't extend his hand.

Once the nurse steps out, he takes note of the room, making a quick left face and heading to Abigail who lays fast asleep. He takes her in with the same quick, sweeping glances that he had in the hall, and he adjusts a blanket rumpled from someone setting something on it. It looks like the indent of a book.

"How did you know?" he asks once he can gain control of his voice. Every steady, assuring beep of the heart monitor bolsters him, gives him courage that his actions weren't in vain.

"Agent Crawford called, and I supposed that you would want to come here, to try and gain some semblance of yourself. Having felt her in death, you will not feel whole until she wakes, yes?"

"…Yes."

He wants to look at Lecter, see his silence once more, but he can't because he is wholly fixated on Abigail Hobbs and the way her lungs expand and lift skin, utterly

promising with the assurance that she can indeed breathe.

When he can finally tear his gaze away, he pulls up a chair and sits down, gripping the case files tightly. Hannibal mimics him, drawing up a chair near the foot of the bed.

"…I looked you up," he admits. Look up is an understatement, but he's not going to go into any more details than that. He still has the journals pulled up on Beverly's tablet to read whenever he gets the chance.

"Did you?"

"I wanted to see if what you were saying was true."

"What did you find?" Hannibal wonders.

"You don't connect in the sense of modern day people. No apps, no social media sites; you do have a website, but you encourage them to call or e-mail rather than glean your therapy style off of what someone posts online about you."

"I said no such thing," Hannibal objects kindly.

"You didn't have to," Will replies. "I'm good at picking up on tone, and while you'll use the internet as a tool, you prefer in-person connections."

"Yes," Hannibal agrees. "Anyone can project what they like onto the internet. I find that face-to-face conversations yield the best results in learning about a person."

"You're also not afraid to manipulate if you think it will get you something that you want," Will said, staring at Abigail. Although her eyes are closed, he can see the sallowness of her skin, can see walls rising up around him to become her house, a world in which she loves her father and fears him, hunts alongside him and wonders when she will become the hunted. He'd tried to connect to her the only way he knew how. Hobbs tried to protect her the only way he knew how.

"I think that in our own way, we all have a special talent for manipulation when we think it's something important," Hannibal replied guiltlessly. "My gaining you access here was so that we could speak, yes, but I also thought to help you ease some of your burdens in worrying over her state. You hadn't seen her living, therefore you could only focus on her potential demise."

The fact that he knows that after only one conversation with Will is staggering, and he thinks back on Lecter's personal works he'd chewed through with eager interest. He was prominent in the psychiatry circles, not necessarily due to a frequent use of the journals to promote his work, but that he only published sparingly. What he did share, though, was so utterly poignant and dense with information that even Will could see the mild genius behind it.

"You honestly think that a simple conversation with you is going to be the thing that I need?" Will asks. He glances over to Lecter, stares at his face, and marvels at the absolute

silence.

"Better me than Jack Crawford. You honestly made him nervous with your speech about deer and mycelium," Hannibal replies. He sounds mildly amused at the thought.

"…I think that when I speak, I make him nervous about a lot of things," Will says slowly. His words have somewhat of a 'confessional' vibe to them that he's not entirely fond of.

"Do you experience that with most people you know?"

"Do you?"

"No," Lecter replies. "But that in no way lessens my ability to have conversations with you."

Will chews on the side of his mouth, staring at Abigail's hands. He wonders what impressions he'd get of her now, if he dared touch skin to skin. He's touched those in unconsciousness before, gotten a feel for their dreams, their last emotions while conscious. He decides not to risk it with her, in case the only thing he can feel is her dying. Although trained to build barriers between him and those he comes into contact with, Will is well aware that that sort of ability does not exist with Abigail Hobbs –not after the first time he grabbed her neck and thought he was dying.

"If she wakes up," Will murmurs, agonized, "she's going to see me as the man that killed her father."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps she will see you as the man that saved her life."

Will nods, accepts this as an option although it is a bleak, reaching one at best. He blows air out of his mouth harshly, rubs gloved palms together. "I'll talk to you, Dr. Lecter, but I can't ensure you're going to entirely like it."

"Rest assured, Agent Graham, I'm going to take an inordinate amount of pleasure in getting to know you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience for an update! Where I've got 3 other fics going at this time, to prevent delayed posts I'll do this guy every other week until those are wrapped up, then I'll do a once-a-week update. I'm thinking Monday would work best!

I just got back from a long weekend family reunion visit, and without service/wifi I was unable to update anything in a timely manner. Hope you understand! :)

With Little Thought We Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3:

Even serial killers got funerals.

Will Graham stands beside an unknown woman and a small, anonymous funeral director. Garrett Jacob Hobbs had been gleaned of any and all they could take from him, from DNA to fingerprints to hair follicles. With no court case, no ruling to take place, they wanted a swift and clean burial for him, and only one family member –a distant one at that –had arrived to see him put six feet under.

She doesn't cry, and she doesn't speak to Will. For that he is immensely relieved.

He hates graveyards. There is no quiet in them, no rest in them. There was no service for Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and with Abigail Hobbs still not awake in the hospital, the funeral director didn't think to offer.

"It's at this time that people normally pay their last respects," the director says, poised over the coffin.

"You'll make sure he goes down?" the woman asks. "Six feet under and covered in dirt?"

Will isn't sure if she's addressing him or if she's addressing the director; he nods all the same.

She leaves them then, heels sinking into the soft earth where thousands rot, and Will watches the coffin sink slowly, going down, down, down until it hits the bottom with a soft *thump*.

"Is there anything you wish to say?" the director asks.

Will shakes his head. He isn't confidant that if he speaks, he'll sound coherent or make any sense.

He sits down and watches the gravediggers work –he isn't sure what he's waiting for until they press the sod down and leave him with a modest, plain gravestone proclaiming nothing more than his name, the year he was born, and the year he died. No mention of being a loving father. No mention of being a kind husband. It's nice to see that stark honesty, considering he was neither of those things.

The graves aren't quiet. Will has been to enough cemeteries to be able to feel the sensations of trapped souls beneath the soil, the grief that sits along every blade of grass, the triumph of the killer standing in the crowd and gloating. He once recalled an empath in

‘group’ that had attended a funeral, only to feel the life of someone trapped in a coffin not twenty feet away, freshly buried. They managed to save the man, although he was in a coma for some time after. The empath drunk himself into a car crash, and he later said he just had to get the taste of dirt out of his mouth.

He sits for a while longer, stares at the gravestone and the space where Garrett Jacob Hobbs will forever remain. There is a sense of righteous pride that Will was able to stop him and save Abigail, but there is also the horror as the look on Hobbs’ face was burned into Will’s eye: pain, indignation, and a love that seared and left marks.

It isn’t until he hears voices that he stands up to leave, and he purposefully skirts around the grave so that he can’t feel Hobbs beneath him. He wonders if he takes off his shoes and presses his bare feet to the sod if he’ll still feel him breathing.

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Lecter ambushes him for lunch, a thermos in one hand and two travel containers in another. Will thinks to turn him away, standing poised by the entrance to HQ as he is, but at the sight of Director Hansen a short distance away, he accepts the invitation. He’d rather be ambushed by Lecter than Director Hansen.

“Do you often miss meals, Agent Graham?” he asks, sitting down at a bench.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s three P.M., and people have normally eaten by now.”

Will watches him unsnap the small bowls, revealing a salad inside with strips of meat laid across the top. The dressing is on the side, and he fumbles with the lid while Hannibal passes over silverware.

“You haven’t eaten,” he points out.

“I was traveling for work and was unfortunately detained. What’s your reason?”

“I had a funeral to go to,” he mumbles. If he says it with enough regret and remorse, he figures Hannibal won’t press on details.

“The funeral of Garrett Jacob Hobbs?”

Nevermind, then. He drizzles the sauce over the salad, taking the fork and spearing a few bits of lettuce before he stuffs his mouth and chews, nodding his appreciation at the taste.

“This is delicious, thank you,” he manages after he’s swallowed. Hannibal’s gaze is steady on him, and he turns a piece of meat over with his fork, itchy under the stare. “Yes, his.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asks.

“No.”

“What did you find as you stood inside of the space where he will forever have a passive presence?”

Will takes a bite of the meat and chews, the flavor of a careful blend of herbs and spices rich and practiced, the mark of someone that cooks and cooks remarkably well. There is something else, though, something that reeks of fear, of racing hearts and a terror that bites deep that makes his jaw freeze, his muscles clench involuntarily. His teeth scratch along one another, and he has to force himself to swallow, the food a rock that drags down his throat slowly.

“…Nothing,” he manages. His stomach roils, and he stuffs another mouthful of lettuce into his mouth to try and wash away the taste of the animal that had died. He has a sudden urge to vomit.

“Something wrong?” Hannibal asks.

“…I can’t always eat meat,” he admits. He wants to feel apologetic about it, but he can’t bring himself to. His tone is challenging, daring Hannibal to question it.

“What do you feel?”

“…Terror. Sometimes the meat tastes like terror.” He snorts and rubs his mouth, like he can somehow wipe away the sensation of being cornered, of the final frantic moments of life. “What animal was it?”

“A rabbit.”

“He should have hopped faster,” Will mutters. He spears another piece of lettuce and stuffs it into his mouth.

“Yes, he should have,” Hannibal agrees with a smile. “Is it like that with all meat for you?”

“Sometimes. Some animals die peacefully, or the food is processed or long dead enough that by the time it gets to me, everything that made it an animal is gone.”

“I do have a personal butcher who sells what he hunts for. I know his beef, pork, and geese are handled humanely, but I can’t account for how the hunted behave before they die.”

Will looks up at him and manages a small, sardonic smile. “Their hearts race, their eyes widen, and in that final moment their muscles tighten. That was a very terrified rabbit.”

They finish their meals in silence, the only thing left in Will’s bowl the neatly cut and cooked remains of a rabbit that just wasn’t fast enough.

The drink in the thermos is a coffee with a rich enough taste that it washes away the remains of Will’s nausea. He sips it, mouth passing along the lip of the cup, and he chances a peek to Hannibal once more. Still silent. Still inscrutable. Curiosity burns inside of him at the sight, as well as something akin to awe. He holds it back, though. He doesn’t want to seem too interested, too intent on the silence.

“I suppose I was looking for some kind of closure,” he admits, referring to Hobbs.

“Is he the first man you’ve ever killed?”

“Yes.”

“Is it his death that haunts your dreams, or the fact that you were the one to do it?”

Will wants to lie, but he figures that defeats the purpose of even doing this in the first place. “I didn’t hesitate. The moment one didn’t drop him, there was another. Then another, and another, until there were no bullets left.”

“You walked into a room where your senses were alive to the situation due to your intimate knowledge of your killer, coupled with your adrenaline as well as your skills as an E-3. Naturally, there would be no hesitation on your part because by then, instincts would take over.”

“Some people have a flight instinct, or at least a freeze instinct,” Will points out.

“You have a fight instinct, but all that means is you are far more adept at survival than your counterparts. Does that somehow make you less of a person, or less deserving of life because you are better at preserving it?”

Yes, Will thinks, although he manages to say, “That is what I’m struggling with.”

“Then going to Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ funeral sounds more like a punishment than a need for closure.”

“Killers like that don’t have large, public funerals. Empaths that have a psychotic break and lash out don’t receive large, public funerals, either.”

“Do you compare the two often?”

“It comes with the job. The last serial killer we found before Hobbs was an E-2, a Feeler and a Dreamer.” He pauses, wondering if he should share anything more. Reluctantly, he says, “Hobbs was an agent close to retirement. An empath –a dreamer.”

“Bare hands on the surfaces of anything that opened stories and fantasies within his head that he couldn’t differentiate from reality,” Hannibal murmurs. He has a poetic, flowered form of speech that is somehow lovely rather than corny. “Do you think you will be like that one day?”

“I wear gloves,” he said. “As long as I keep them on, I don’t have to worry about things like that.”

He doesn’t have to worry about things like that, but he does anyway. When he returns to work and is handed a file containing the information regarding a rogue E-2 FBI Agent, he worries even more.

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The plane dumps them into a small town in Georgia, the most exciting part of the town being their annual BBQ & Blues festival that the FBI had just missed out on. Will tracks the signs struck into the ground every so many feet advertising an amazing homemade BBQ sauce competition with a rain-stained cardboard paper sign taped to the side declaring the winner Suzanne Perkins.

Suzanne Perkins would never claim her fifty dollar gift certificate to her choice of restaurant, though; she wouldn't do anything ever again.

Once again he finds himself waiting while Jack Crawford goes through the house, clearing everything out and ensuring that it's safe. He scuffs his shoe along the gravel, traces idle figure eights with his toe. Despite it having been a day since the incident, people still mill about the police line, necks craning to catch a glimpse of anything they can see.

"Agent Francis Dolarhyde, E-2 Seer and Dreamer," Beverly says, waiting beside him. "I worked with him once –two years ago? Quiet guy. Cleft pallet and really pretty eyes."

Will studies his dossier, his photo sharp and clean despite the barely noticeable cleft pallet. His suit is pressed, and following the first photo there is a second showing him in Marine Corps dress blues, expression equally somber and striking.

"It's confirmed him?" he asks.

"He was supposed to report in after gaining information from his last assignment out in the field, but he never did. His handler reported it, and they started tracking his last movements. Cameras got him at the Atlanta Airport, witness saw him refuse to pay for gas at a gas station on the way here. Cameras confirmed it was him chinsing out on paying."

"He's never even had a speeding ticket," Will murmurs. An E-2 is not as rare as an E-3, although they tend to be more volatile. Will can't recall the number of studies done trying to figure out why *that's* a thing, but from personal experience he can say it's because an E-3 is more likely to become a vegetable before they even get the chance to try and lash out at someone, let alone have a psychotic break and commit murder.

"Clean record, although he was essentially abandoned by his mother before we got a hold of him and sent him to the institution. Maybe something happened there and it's finally manifesting now."

"Always blame the mom," Will says sagely. Sarcastically.

He's allowed in by Crawford, and Beverly trails after him in order to speak with Jack in low, hushed tones. When he steps into the house, there is a shift in the air around him, like the very space he stands in is drenched in screams. It takes him a beat too long to walk past the entry, delve farther into a house that for all intents and purposes, looks completely normal.

That is, until he gets to the hall where the family sleeps.

The blood spread along the wall burns into his eyes, and as he stares he can see the walls within his mind folding up and falling away, leaving him in a strange sense of limbo, his skin not his own, his bones not his own. Numbly, he takes off his gloves and tucks them away, relieved to know that at least this time, there would be no living person to distract him with their almost-death.

He places his bare hand on the walls and falls inside of the memory.

I wake to a suppressed gunshot; my half-sleeping mind is delirious, confused, until my wife screams and I'm very much awake, shouting out. Another shot, quiet, muffled, and a burning pain erupts in my neck, makes my cry cut short. Blankets, tight around me strangle, and I fumble and fall from the bed, wheezing. The blood is hot against my cheek, and distantly my wife cries and cries and cries.

Shadowed foosteps retreat from the room. My children. My children.

It is not strength that carries me, stumbling and bleeding out down the hall, but a terror as I realize that I am dying and my children are going to die, too. I try to speak, try to moan my disapproval at that, but the words are impossible, the searing pain in my neck arresting. As he goes to open the door, I throw myself at him, and we grapple, falling into the wall where his arms flail and the gun is seen, distinctly grey in the hallway night light.

I am dying. I am dying.

He turns the gun, and I bite into his neck, knowing that as I do I will die, that I will die and he will take my children. The barrel presses to my temple, upside down, and I rip into his skin, draw blood.

There is a searing pain against my skin. Then nothing, nothing.

Will comes to with a hiss, stumbling back and catching himself. As quickly as the walls went down he tries to draw them up, and he focuses on compartmentalizing and drawing in deep breaths before he continues. Behind him, he senses the footfalls of a scene annotator, and he turns his head.

"The wife was shot first, then the husband. Their bedroom. He tried to follow the RA down the hall when the RA went for the children, and he got a bite out of him."

"Test tissue residue in Mr. Perkins' mouth," the annotator murmurs, nodding.

Will steps into the room across from the smearing of blood, the splatter on the wall he knows to be Mr. Perkin's brain matter, and he stares at the carnage. There is blood soaking in one of the pillows on the bed to the left, then a large puddle of it underneath the bed on the right.

"The first child is shot in bed, the second dragged out from under their bed before being shot," he murmurs, kneeling down. He stares at the spaces on the frame of the bed where hands dared press, and he reaches out and presses his palms to them.

Precision, cold and trained, something of instinct and repetition alike –the child hides but I do not fear, I do not worry that I cannot reach them. They scream, struggle, but there is no resistance, like a blade of grass falling to a finely honed knife. They were not taught to hide as I was, not taught to know how to be quiet enough to avoid notice. I was, though. I hide and I hide inside of my own mind, unaware of myself.

You're screaming, but don't you understand that you are not just flesh? You are light and air and color and quick sounds ended because I decided to change you. Balloons of color bursting, conjoining with those that fell before to create anew. You scrabble away from me, pleading, but there is no escape. There is no escape.

This is my design. I will Become.

Will jerks from the sensations of Dolarhyde's thoughts with far less finesse than he did with Mr. Perkins'. It takes far longer to raise the barriers between him and the feeling of cold metal in his palm, and he doesn't speak, holding his breath until he can be sure that when he exhales, he pushes Dolarhyde from him in his entirety, leaving nothing but Will behind.

He's pretty sure he succeeded, although there is enough doubt that he can't speak for several more seconds.

"The child hid underneath the bed, but he knew to drag him out to shoot him. The child on the left died first, the child on the right died second. They were left here, and he returned," he manages when he can ensure his voice doesn't tremble. The light and sound and air and color of the child lingers where he died, and as Will stands he swings a leg over the space to try and disperse it.

"He knew that they were here," the annotator says quietly. Will glances to them, relieved to see their head down. If they take note of how his hands shake, they say nothing.

"He'd have watched the house. There was no hesitation in his movements to the bed, so he knew exactly where to go," he agrees.

He walks from the room, and he forces himself to enter the bedroom where the air is dank and heavy. There is a hunger, lethal and plaintive, and it sits just over the space where the most blood has collected. There is so much of it that it's not quite dry, wet and puddled in the center. He doesn't want to lay his hands near it; he knows, he *knows* what happened next, and he doesn't want to see.

The spaces along the blood glow faintly in his eyes though, and the walls come tumbling down before he can even press his hands down.

Mirrors rest over your eyes; can you see? Can you see? Brown eyes stare, dark with hunger, but the walls do not fall away from me as I look into them. I am trapped, barricaded in, but I am not alone with the sounds of the hunger, I am not alone with the sounds of the dying. Can you see me?

Can you see?

I look at you, and I see your life playing out before me: the sounds you make as you fuck, the tone you take when you scold. Are you not aware of me the way I am aware of you? You who looks through these mirrors, can you see the bruises deep down beneath my skin, the sensation of a belt that hits and hits and hits and hits…?

The walls will not lower, but even awake I can Dream your life like it is my own; my wedding, my anniversary, my children, my husband. They're not mine *though, they're yours, but who are you? Where do you end and I begin?*

Can you see? Can you look into my eyes and see me?

He's pressed against the wall behind him before he is aware of the action, before he even feels his legs move. He grounds himself through tactile sensations, the gloves tight against his skin, the way his pants press to his thighs, the way his shirt tag itches on his neck. It is much harder to come back from the feeling of his hands gliding across Mrs. Perkins' bare form, and the walls don't feel so sturdy anymore.

"Are the mirrors in the bathroom broken?" he rasps.

"Every mirror in the house," the annotator says.

"He broke the mirrors, placed shards over the eyes, mouth, and clitoris; he performed necrophilic acts upon Mrs. Perkins', then placed the bodies as seen in the photos."

"Necrophilic acts," they murmur, writing furiously.

"He placed pajama pants on Mr. Perkins –he'd originally slept in his underwear."

He stays pressed against the wall as he speaks, like he can somehow melt through it if he tries hard enough. His hands feel like they're gripping dead flesh.

"The bite marks are not sexual," he says to the room. "There is no center suck bruise, nor was that his intent. It's possessive."

"What is your name?" the annotator looks up from their writing and studies him intently.

"I am Will Graham," he assures them.

He's let out of the room with that confirmation that he has made his barriers firm, and he wanders down the hall dazedly, studying the faint glow of footsteps that trail not out of the door but to the fridge. He presses a palm to it, cringing at the sensation of a casual feeling of physical hunger, and he opens the door and stares at the Baby Belle cheese wheel half-eaten. He grabs his glove, sets the cheese on the counter with it, and continues on.

He stands outside underneath the sunlight, staring up at the blinding clear day. In the south, it isn't as cold although it's fall, and he takes off his light jacket, laying it over his arm. Dolarhyde was tired after all of his hard work; he'd gone out to look at the moon. It refueled him, charged him. Will plants his feet where Dolarhyde rested, and he flexes and curls his hands to try and dispel the feeling of mirror shards on his palms.

“It’s Dolarhyde?” Jack Crawford asks. Will senses more than hears his approach.

“Yes.”

Jack swears, staring out at the beautifully fenced back yard.

“What set him off?”

“Someone bruised and whipped him,” he says, “but that feels like a long time ago. He’s building, creating.”

“Creating what?”

“Something. I can’t see it yet, but it’s very special to him.”

“Does it feel like he’s lost reality?” Jack wonders. It’s a weary sort of question. Most rogue agents become so ingrained within their delusions that they have no grasp on reality, the walls not only down but non-existent, as though they never were. They have a sense of the entire world, so much so that they are the world and all of the fibers holding it together.

“No. He’s very much aware. He feels that he’s transcended; he’s trying to Become.”

“Become?”

“Yes. That’s…I can’t see more yet. Where’s his house?”

“We can get you on a plane tomorrow back to DC.”

Will nods, mulling over the feeling of teeth in his mouth that are his but not his. “There’s cheese in there. The bite marks look oblong, weird, but I don’t think his teeth had that sort of deformity.”

“Did you work with him?”

“Maybe once,” Will says. “I think I remember him at the academy, but not well.”

“The academy,” Jack murmurs.

The academy was a government funded institution for empaths; by law, children showing signs for the gift were to be tested, and if found to fall into the empath category, were sent to learn how to control and hone in on their gifts. It was never mandatory that they work within government positions like the FBI, but someone with a certificate from the academy who looked to those professions found themselves fast-tracked to the top of the applicant list and given a hefty pay raise above others if hired.

One look at Will as an E-3, and they’d all but salivated at the thought of him working with the FBI, no matter his mental instability.

“An RA in a small town like this isn’t going to go over well,” Will tells Jack. “This is that cliché town where nothing bad never happens to no one.”

“The police department all but begged us to take this,” Jack agrees. “Full cooperation. Do you think you can handle tracking an RA while we look more into the murders here?”

Do you think you can handle tracking someone that you may very well end up becoming one day?

“That’s my job, Jack,” Will says. “I hunt RA’s. Dozens. This should be no different.”

Standing in the sun, trying to let it warm his chilled skin, Will Graham has a distinct feeling that he may have unintentionally lied to Jack Crawford, saying that. He doesn’t rescind his statement, though. He couldn’t if he’d tried.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your support for this fic! I've always been a sucker for a fantasy type story, so this one and the soulmate au really have a special place in my heart! :) You guys are amazing.

What Validations We Seek

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4:

It's late when the flight gets back from Georgia, and Will sleeps in one of the bunks at the EBAU rather than make the drive home. He has his own blanket and pillowcase that no one touches, and he sets them up on the bunk before he sleeps. Sometimes, laying his head in the space where someone else slept gave him the ability to see their dreams if he didn't layer his own things accordingly.

It's not their dreams that wake him in the early morning, though; thankfully, it's not his sordid, dark ones, either.

It's Hannibal Lecter.

He opens the door to the room and squints, sleep still clinging to him. The knocking hadn't been overly repetitious, although it'd been firm enough that it'd jolted him from a dream where he'd been lost in a maze of ever-growing hedges. Lecter stands the way he's come to expect a therapist to stand –back straight, shoulders back, and expression placidly open. When Will stares at him, he notes the lack of animal hair on the leg of his trousers, the smell of breakfast cooked an hour or so before, and a cologne of rich, careful selection. He sees things one would only see in having to look with their real eyes rather than his metaphorical ones. It's an interesting sensation, and it brings him one step farther out of the cobwebs that cling to his mind.

"Good morning, Will," he says cheerfully.

"Where's Crawford?" Will asks. He glances past Lecter, sliding his glasses on. "Or Bloom?"

"Agent Crawford is deposed in court, and Dr. Bloom is seeing one of her patients today," Hannibal replies. "I was allowed into the headquarters to see you here."

"I have work."

"Then the adventure will be ours," Hannibal decides. "If you don't mind, of course."

Will minds very much, Hannibal's decision to make his work their adventure, but he lets him into the small rest room all the same. The tabs on Beverly's tablet still contain his articles. Thankfully, it sits closed so that Dr. Lecter can't see. He's not sure what the good doctor would think of him reading his things, let alone knowing he's now reread them about four or five times.

It's a haphazard version of the FBI, what with the scattered tables and the bunkbeds assembled against the walls. It's for any agent working at HQ with long hours, but years before it'd melded into the sort of space that only empaths used when the work became too much. Neurotypicals tended to avoid the place entirely.

There is an empath sleeping in the corner with bad dreams, and when Will glances to his distraught face, he can see the edges of terror, the whisper of someone chasing and chasing and chasing and not letting the empath get away *this time*.

He looks away and quickly pulls his gloves on before getting dressed. The clothes from the day before will have to do.

Just across from him, pinned to the wall, is a picture of four people posed with a sense of comradery. They're meant to be empaths, with their wide smiles and eager eyes, and the caption beneath it says, 'Yes, we can!' Will eyes it with a curl to his lip as he laces up his shoes. None of the people in the picture are empaths.

They don't speak as he makes coffee and sees himself out of HQ, jacket buttoned against a cool breeze and a whisper that Abigail Hobbs still hasn't woken up. They stand on the steps, and he tries to wake himself up, small shakes of his shoulders and feet that rock him forward, then back.

"I've got an RA," he says. At Lecter's furrowed brow, he explains, "Rogue agent. If they didn't tell you, that's what I do here, for the FBI. I track rogue agents."

"They send empaths after rogue agents?" he asks, surprised.

"They send empaths after empath rogue agents," Will clarifies. "If it's an E-1, they send an E-2. If it's an E-2, they send another E-2 with countering talents, or an E-3."

"Where you are the only E-3, I'm sure most of the responsibility of E-2's falls directly to you, or if it is a particularly difficult E-1, they'll ask for your help."

Will nods, staring out at a small scattering of agents walking in a not-quite group. He can spot the empaths from the way they walk close enough to seem 'together', but distanced by instinct, by habit. No one tries to move too near to them, and they maintain a guise of blending into the crowd without being the crowd. All empaths have that talent, to attempt at being the crowd while never being able to be *part* of the crowd.

"Most of them resent me," he says. Lecter looks amused, and he hurries on to say, "Not because of my abilities. Empaths don't tend to draw lines like that. It's because they know that if they step out too far, Jack sends me after them."

"You represent what happens if they cannot maintain control," Hannibal realizes. "How do you find your own methods of control, Agent Graham? How did you regain control of yourself after you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs?"

Will wants to say that he builds forts; that he is quite capable of maintaining control and placing walls between him and the man he murdered. He glances to Hannibal's face,

notes the serene expression of someone that is impartial, someone that asks because he'd said it was alright to ask. He can't say these things to Jack; he sure as hell won't say them to Director Hansen. There's something appealing about saying them to someone that another empath can't walk up to and pry the words from simply by looking into their eyes. There's something appealing about saying the truth to someone like Hannibal Lecter.

"…Someone put my gloves on for me," he reveals, quiet. Ashamed. "And…I had a sensation like I was killing myself. Like I'd put the knife to my own throat and…" He makes a cutting motion with his free hand. "I just laid there, trying to build the walls up, trying to… come back into my own head, and I couldn't. Agent Crawford had to haul me up and drag me from the cabin before I could even realize that I was Will Graham and not Garrett Jacob Hobbs or Abigail Hobbs."

"Do you feel that you have some semblance of control now?"

He knows the right thing to say, so he says it, otherwise he'll be placed before his director and forced to face the music. "I'm in control now," he lies.

No one has time for an E-3 that can't maintain control. He heads down the steps to his car, and Dr. Hannibal Lecter follows.

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He's smiling as they pull up to Dolarhyde's address, and Will can't feel his amusement as he looks at him.

"What's so funny?" He's never had to ask that before. Normally, in a simple glance he can see the reason behind the smile, the rhyme behind the flicker of light in someone's eye. He steadfastly ignores the mild sensation of just how it feels to have to ask –almost pleasant in the sense of ignorance.

"You see the police raids on television, you see empaths appearing in court to reveal the thoughts behind a murderer's blank gaze, and you see the FBI releasing news to the press about terrorism," Hannibal says, climbing out of the car. "Yet now I'm able to see the work that leads to that sort of media reveal. It's like peeking behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*."

"His name is Francis Dolarhyde," he says, walking up to the fence. He hands the file to Lecter, reasons that if Lecter can keep his head on straight, he has every reason to see the file. "Attended the EA from the age of ten up to graduation, fast tracked through university. Worked in the Marine Corps for four years, chose not to renew his contract and instead began FBI training and education. A Field Agent, E-2 Seer and Dreamer that worked as an empath inspector. If empaths began showing signs of any form in instability, he investigated the situation to deem whether or not their position in the FBI needed to be reevaluated."

"They allow empaths to work in the field like that?"

"Some of them. He'd have been tested extensively." Will had been tested extensively. He stops at the fence that he has to open in order to walk up to the front door, and he stares

for a long time up at the bleak, aged house. While Hannibal reads over the dossier, Will removes his gloves and delicately places them in his coat pocket. He flexes his fingers, studying the space Dolarhyde occupied once as a place of rest.

His hands pass along the latch to open the fence, and he is a mailman, striding forward to drop off a necessary bit of mail. The feeling is bleak, a smear of a memory, and it's cast aside as he walks up the path towards the house. The grass is aged, yellowed, more crab grass and weeds than anything, and when the wind blows, dandelion seeds scatter and cling to the bottom of his pants.

He touches the railing as he walks up the steps, but there is nothing but a faint, echoing whisper that the rail has been used before. Someone was fatigued when touching it, but then it is gone. At the small mailbox by the door, mail is stuffed in. He doesn't touch it; he knows the mailman is losing his patience, having to cram more and more mail in with no one to retrieve it.

"Can you feel everything?"

"Not everything. Not even I'm omnipotent," he replies. He jiggles the handle, not surprised to find it locked. To the amusement of Hannibal, he retrieves a key from his pocket and unlocks it, walking in.

"Do you have keys to the homes of every agent?"

"Every empath."

It's not lost on him that the right to privacy doesn't exist as far as the FBI is concerned with empaths. Although it's fair, seeing as how the FBI doesn't think any citizen has a right to privacy –if you're doing nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear.

Right?

It's taken a step farther with empaths, though. Copies of their house keys, the right to read through any and all mail if they behave in a manner 'questioning of the integrity of the FBI', an ability to control just where they receive medical aid if the need arises. Will hasn't had to endure any of their invasive behavior, but he is well aware of the ability for that to change at any time. Perks of the job and all.

The air inside is stagnant, the house not entirely clean but not quite cluttered enough to be considered messy. There's an odd smell, something like musk, dry sweat and copper, and Will stands in the entryway, inhaling it. He passes hands along a dusty end table where odds and ends, knick-knacks from the fifties rest, a weird feeling of bitter nostalgia that curves around him as though he is standing in a tunnel.

"There is not much in the way of information from his time before he came to the institution," Hannibal says. It's a jarring noise in the otherwise quiet, and Will manages a small hum of agreement, walking over a creaky step. The walls in his mind are slowly falling away with the sort of hesitation due when dealing with a strange place, but as he walks into the living room they're completely obliterated in the wake of the fury.

Where the entryway had the sensation of a grandmother meticulously displaying her small bit of worth, the living room is that dream gone wrong. A floral print couch lays decimated by what could only be a hefty axe, the wall paper curling in desolate strips from the wall. Pottery lay smashed in shards, picture frames scattered across the floor. There is an untouched recliner that sits as a stark juxtaposition to the otherwise destroyed living room, and Will picks his way through, sitting down on it.

Lies, lies, lies is this place that I rest, where I lay my head. They don't know; they can never know, and I take my secrets to the grave while I drag the rest of them with me.

He tries to delve deeper, but the feeling is old, although strong. Will passes fingertips over faded arm rests, curls his bottom lip in and bites it at the sense of an honest, horrific injustice.

"Did Dolarhyde do this?"

"They say it's easier to just refer to them as an RA," Will says after a prolonged silence. "You need to distance yourself from them, Dr. Lecter."

"Are they afraid that if we don't distance ourselves, we will grow to pity them and excuse their actions?"

"Yes." Will is mildly pleased to hear that Lecter doesn't say 'you', but humors him and says 'us'. Like Lecter has to be the one to force up walls inside of his mind.

They're down, though, and as Will looks about he can see the path Dolarhyde paved, furious in his actions, a twisted form of justice his adrenaline as he took an axe to everything he owned –no, not owned. Gained. This was his house, but it certainly wasn't his home.

He continues on, moving from the living room to a dining room where the hollowed remains of an extravagant dinner lay. Bits of food still on the plates were a breeding ground for maggots, and he stares at their hungry but lazy path on the plate for longer than he should.

In the kitchen he finds nothing but more dirty plates, although as his bare hands pass along the door he pauses. He palms it, focuses on the glowing pulse on the knob. There's a desperation to the feeling of throwing the door open, a heady taste of betrayal. Fear.

"He came in through the back, not the front," he says. "Last he was here."

"Can you feel how long ago that was?" Rather than the annotator that echoed him as they wrote, Lecter is engaging. Somehow, that's more grounding to Will, to have to think as himself rather than someone else in the moments with his walls down.

"Before he killed the Perkins family," Will says after a thought. "This is older than the feelings and thoughts of his murders there."

"So he came home first, then made his way to the Perkins?"

"Why the Perkins, though?" Will wonders out loud. "Why them? He had to travel to them, take time for them…"

“Perhaps Agent Crawford’s work studying the Perkins will give insight to the why, when you meet with him once more to tell him the where and how of your RA.”

Will nods in agreement, continues on towards the hall that leads upstairs. There are shattered shards along the plush but old carpet, and Will looks down to see his eyes reflected up. Dolarhyde smashed the mirrors.

Bedrooms lay empty, spaces where someone once was but never again would be. Will stands in the tepid space of each one until he can confirm that Dolarhyde didn’t enter there in his haste to destroy certain aspects of this place in which he felt so confined.

He starts to enter the master bedroom and pauses at the doorway. Inside, the terrifying sense of panic lays.

“What do you feel?” Hannibal asks when he doesn’t walk in.

Will grips the doorway with his bare hands, trembles in the wake of a dread that is cloying, grasping. There is no escape. There is no end. There was an end, but there is no more, utterly destroyed in the wake of this time that reaches and reaches, and he’d been stupid enough to reach back. He stares ahead to the faint, ever-so faint impressions of someone rushing through the room, leaving dresser drawers hanging out, a small chair near a vanity overturned. The bed is a disastrous mess of things thrown, things left forgotten in haste, and it’s there that he walks to, crawling onto the lumpy, aged material to lay down.

It’s there that the fear abates, a lulling and steady wave that crashes over, then recedes. In the dip in the center where someone slept the most, he lays back and trembles, one palm pressed to a ratty coverlet, the other palm pressed to a forgotten jacket. Although faded, old from passed time, there is a sensation that this is the only place Dolarhyde could settle his mind, settle the racing thoughts inside as he sees and dreams.

“He’s afraid,” he says when he can speak.

“What does he fear here, Agent Graham?”

“There is…information he’s found. Something he’s learned that he can’t reconcile. It’s…thrown everything to question, and he’s…reverted.”

“Reverted to what?”

“To the death,” Will murmurs. “He has to run. He has to run, but where to, he…isn’t quite sure yet. Maybe *I’m* just not seeing it. But here is where…he slept.”

“Your rogue agent found something of great import that caused him to revert to a space where he was the monster rather than see it in someone else,” Hannibal says, and he doesn’t enter the room. “What was he investigating when he didn’t report back?”

Will climbs off of the bed when he’s sure the fear surrounding it won’t overwhelm him, and he walks out of the room, looking around.

“That’s what I need to find out, I suppose,” he says, heading back down the stairs. After a beat, Hannibal follows.

When they’re outside, he dares to ask, “Did they ask you to follow me around, Dr. Lecter? Jack afraid I’m not going to be able to handle it?”

It’s a taunting, jabbing sort of question, declared with bared teeth and an unironic gesture towards the door he’s locked behind himself.

“Yes.” He doesn’t seem perturbed to be so honest and direct, blunt and unhesitating in his answer.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“You seem perfectly capable of recreating your barriers and walls, even in the face of emotion that stopped you in your tracks. I would inform them that if they’re searching for a psychiatric stamp of approval, they certainly have it.”

Will nods, not sure if he’s happy to hear that, or if it’s some sort of sign that Lecter has as much trouble seeing his mind as he has in seeing into Lecter’s. There’s the chance that he’s being generous, that if he says it enough then Will will actually gain the ability to build effective walls.

“Are you going to keep following me around?” he asks instead, heading towards the car.

“For an indefinite amount of time, yes.”

Will nods, accepting this rather than fighting it. He did give the good doctor the okay to have conversations.

“Coffee, then?”

“Coffee sounds wonderful, Agent Graham.”

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Jack returns from court to see Will waiting in his office, gloved and dozing in his chair a few hours later. It’s the sound of his briefcase hitting the desk that jolts him up, and he blinks rapidly and looks around blearily, adjusting the glasses set crookedly on his face.

“You’re back,” Jack says by way of greeting.

“Dolarhyde hasn’t returned to the house since the Perkins. He’s scared and trying to hole up somewhere.”

“He’s scared,” Jack repeated.

“He’s found some information while undercover that really spooked him,” he says, shifting to get comfortable in the chair. “When I asked for the files, they wouldn’t give them

to me. Who was he investigating?"

"Why do you need to know what the information was?" Jack asks, sitting down. It's the way he shifts as he sits, adjusting himself and busying his hands that tips Will off. He can all but smell the unease coming off of him.

Dolarhyde isn't the only one that's spooked.

"…If I know what made him so afraid, I can find out where he'd go," he says slowly. His eyes track the hands that try to open a small pack of trail mix, yanking down so hard that Jack almost spills it across the desk.

"I know it's a classified operation," Jack says after uttering a short curse. "All of Dolarhyde's work was."

"Right."

"Out of my jurisdiction sort of classification," he tacks on after looking at Will's unimpressed expression.

"Jack," Will warns. "I have a hard time believing anything is out of your jurisdiction."

"This is."

"Then so is my help," Will decides, standing up.

"Excuse me?" Jack looks up from his trail mix, and the stubborn, set expression on his face is one Will has seen a thousand times.

"You asked if I can handle it, and I can't handle not being able to do my job because of some internal political bull shit," he says. "I'm not crawling into his head half-assed. Don't make me do that and then not help by refusing to fill in the blanks."

The air turns heavy as they look at one another, Will focusing on his mouth rather than his eyes. He knows that if he looks at his eyes, he'll see everything he needs –maybe even the information Jack claims is confidential. It's not enough of a risk for him to try and look, though; he's seen enough times into Jack's mind that he, without fail, falls into the same memory, and it's not a memory he wants to see at the moment. He's not in enough control.

"You're a pain in my ass," Jack says with a sigh of defeat. "I'll talk to Kade Purnell – she's the director of EI."

"Thanks for letting me do my job," Will says, and he walks out before Jack can snap back.

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He doesn't go out with co-workers when they are kind enough to invite him out for drinks. Drinks mean bars, bars means people, and the amount of people that have climbed

inside of the bone arena of his skull are enough to leave him exhausted, worn thin like a fraying, old shirt.

Instead, he drives to Wolf Trap and greets the dogs that rush out from the house when he opens the door, dropping down onto the porch to give them each the attention they deserve. They are kind, lapping at his shirt rather than his face, and his gloved hands rub spots they couldn't have scratched themselves.

Dogs are kinder than people, he thinks as he sits outside with a glass of whiskey and lets them run around. Their love is a pure thing, and when one of them licks his wrist, he only gains the impression of their wanting more treats than he's willing to share at the moment. As a pack, they are a singular, cohesive unit rather than too many individuals existing within the same space. Alana has made it clear she thinks he has too many of them, but whenever another stray turns up, he can't find it in his heart to do anything more than let them stay.

Dogs, in all of their love and understanding, are far better than people.

He cleans up a dinner for one, feeds the dogs again and finds himself hunkered around another boat engine from someone down the road that couldn't afford to take to a shop. The wind outside glances off of old windowpanes, makes them shake, and he thinks of the sounds the cabin made when he'd rushed in, not knowing what he'd find. The cabin was quieter than his house, at peace with the monstrous death inside of it. When he finds himself staring down at his clenched, blood-stained hands rather than greasy hands holding tools, he decides it's time for bed. Redirect, redirect, redirect.

When he goes to climb into bed, he finds Abigail Hobbs bleeding to death on one side and Mrs. Perkins bleeding to death on the other. He sighs, considers them both for a long moment, then crawls in between the two of them to try and get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of the love this has gotten! Now that 2 fics are finished and 1 more is wrapping up, This will become a weekly update --it looks like Mondays seem to be best for me! :)

What Games We Play

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5:

Hannibal Lecter's office is the product of a man that drowns in aesthetics. When Will is allowed in from a small waiting room, he learns more about Dr. Lecter by how he decorates than how he interacts. There is a sense of vertigo, Will's having to look around to learn about someone rather than simply look into their eyes to see. He knows of several empaths that would have been annoyed at the shift, at the sense of tilting over as their world and all of its truths changed.

Will harbors no such feelings. After his readings on Dr. Lecter, he is more than eager to learn by visual directions rather than empath-impressions. It's a hunger he won't deny himself, seeing as how he's never been able to entertain it before.

"Are you going to sit down?" Lecter asks him as he peruses books ranging from Dante to Doyle to Bronte. He pauses on one whose spine is mildly abused, and he pulls the book out in order to open it, curious.

"You like Blake," he says, glancing back to Lecter seated in a leather upholstered chair.

"I do," he agrees, and if he minds Will's pacing and perusing, it doesn't show on his face. That sort of uncertainty, that sense of *unknowing*, makes him wander about more, glancing over everything with a sort of hunger that distracts him from the fact that he didn't get much sleep the night before.

"Cruelty has a human heart, and jealousy a human face," he tells Lecter absentmindedly beside a loud paneling of curtains. He thumbs through the book, feeling pages with gloved hands. He wonders what sort of impressions he'd take from touching the pages with his fingertips unclothed, but he doesn't do it. There is something exciting, eager about his thoughts at the realization that for the first time in forever, he'll have to make an educated guess.

Hannibal Lecter interests him far more than he's willing to let on.

"Terror the human form divine, and Secresy the human dress," Hannibal finishes for him. "*A Divine Image*, William Blake. Tell me about Agent Hobbs, Agent Graham."

"Are you asking if he had a cruel, human heart with a jealous human face?" he asks, pausing beside a stag whose heft of brass carving looks heavy enough to be troublesome if it ever fell over. He glides the back of his free hand along the curve of the flank, staring at the intricate details along its neck, the intelligent look rendered in its carved eyes.

“You know him best of all, since you tracked him. The news didn’t make it public that he was a rogue agent, therefore I was mildly surprised when you told me that.”

Will logs it away that Hannibal Lecter’s surprise is so well hidden that when he’d first told him of Hobbs, it hadn’t shown in the slightest. He’ll have to get better at reading his face, learn the small tics and twitches of it. “The FBI doesn’t like it to be public that despite their best efforts, empaths aren’t the most solid of choices for field work.”

“Why use you, then, if it’s so utterly dangerous?”

“The man hours alone that it saves in using us saves the government, and thereby the people, billions of dollars. The equipment used in the labs that can be set aside for only the more complicated or necessary work that normally costs hundreds to thousands for use or operation is another money saver, and even with our higher pay and mental compensation plans, it ultimately saves the most money to use us than to not.”

“The mental strain alone ultimately breaks most empaths in the end, though,” Lecter points out.

“Saves money on retirement, then, too,” Will retorts.

“As we can see with the late Agent Hobbs,” Lecter replies after a beat, dryly. “What caused him to go rogue?”

Will peruses a small section of books dedicated to art work, and he finds William Blake once more. He takes that book from the shelf, curiosity making him turn pages, thumbing through to find ones with the most faded edges, one touched by hands of reverence or eagerness. What art moves Dr. Lecter? What gives him inspiration, voice, *essence*?

“…He was retiring soon,” he says, and he glances over to Lecter to gauge his reaction to Will touching his things. His expression is impassive, his deep-set eyes intent but not narrowed. Will marvels at the ability to study, to see without *seeing*, and he makes his way closer, feet sinking into the plush and intricate design of a floor rug as he stands opposite of Lecter. He doesn’t sit just yet, though. “He had a standard, six-month mental evaluation, like we all do in order to test our mental state. He didn’t pass, and with his daughter graduating high school as well, it was decided that he would be better suited retiring and going home to help her with that rather than continue work that he couldn’t do and do well.”

“Do you think the retirement caused him to lose sight of everything that he deemed important?”

“I think it was a catalyst, but the retirement was because he was losing his grasp on reality even before he starting killing. In his evaluation, he discussed his daughter with a behavior and dialogue verging on obsessive, and he referred to their time together as a form of honoring who she was and what she was. Her upcoming graduation, coupled with a red stamp of disapproval on his sheet were only the straws to ultimately break the camel’s back, not some singular moment that made him fantasize about killing.”

“Was it killing, in his mind?” Hannibal asks. Will handles the two books, shifts and paces along the rug in order to study a painting on the wall depicting two women in a glade beside a well. He stares at the painting, at the oil on canvas rendered with care and adoration, and he shakes his head whether Hannibal can see it or not.

“He was honoring them, and in doing so, honored her,” he says slowly. “They thought that his retirement would give him the time to spend with her before she left, but that sudden shift in a life plan, coupled with what he thought to be a loss of his daughter, pushed him over, and the intrusive thoughts and dreams he’d already struggled with took hold until he couldn’t see his way out anymore.”

“You told Dr. Bloom that he wasn’t like most psychopathic empaths –the title for them is, of course, in itself a paradox.”

“He’s not,” Will says it, realizes he’s speaking as though Hobbs is still alive. “He… *was* sensitive. His delusions, his dreams made him believe that he was honestly honoring those girls, giving them something beyond themselves as he found a way to connect to his daughter without having to hurt her. He tried to make their deaths as painless as possible.”

“In comparison, you shooting him will have felt far more jarring after you experienced the form of care that he gave to his victims while giving him no such respect in his own demise.”

The fact that he can see that, the fact that Lecter says those words with such assurance, such confidence is staggering, and Will turns back to him to stare, swallowing down a noise of indignation and surprise. He meets Dr. Lecter’s gaze and it holds for far longer than he’s ever held a gaze with someone –such things would have normally pulled him into the dark depths of the iris, the knowing place where ugly things were left to rot inside of the mind. With Lecter, though, he isn’t drawn in; instead, he notes the pleased crinkles near his eyes, the faintest of twitches near his lips that suggests he knows exactly what Will is doing, roaming around touching his things.

Dr. Lecter doesn’t mind it in the least.

If anything, he seems amused to see Will invade his space with the behavior of someone that is used to doing that for a living with no one to stop them. Will finds it in himself to sit down, still holding both the book of art and the book of poetry like shields against Lecter’s immense sense of *knowing*.

“She was his golden ticket,” Will finds himself saying. “He was about to destroy it because all else was lost. The FBI took his job, his future, his plans, his…aspirations, left him to go home where life itself was taking away the one pride and joy he had, and in his mind they let him go to watch the only thing he had left leave him. I can unequivocally understand him, but I don’t regret killing him.”

“No, in the heat of the moment, I’d almost say you enjoyed it.”

He rears back in his chair, gripping the books tightly at that. There is no indication of judgement or censure in those words, just a calm and almost detached tone to it, like Lecter is

commenting on the particularly pretty shade of blue in a pair of off brand dress slacks.

"…Killing is the ugliest thing in the world," he finds himself saying. Slow, purposeful. Like he has had to recite the words in his head several times before forcing them out.

"There is something beautiful in its power, though; we inherited our capacity for violence and cruelty from our human ancestors, not our animal ancestors. There is something to be said to be able to enjoy it from an artistic perspective, as you tend to have to do when you look into the eyes of a fellow empath and see how they felt in killing."

"Trying to trap me, doctor?" Will taunts lightly. "Going to tell Jack I've an itch for killing people now because of Agent Hobbs?"

"On the contrary, my intent is to show you the many ways in which you can understand that killing, for all of its horrific nature, the ugliness you see it to be, can also be purposeful, right. You're allowed to take pleasure in the way you took control of your circumstances and saved your life as well as the life of Abigail Hobbs. That in no way makes you the monster your mind would have you be."

"'The Caverns of the Grave I've seen, and these I show'd to England's Queen. But now the Caves of Hell I view, Who shall I dare to show them to?'" Will quotes Blake, fingers tapping lightly over the cover. Hannibal considered him, head tilting slightly to the other side, almost animalistic in nature, before he smiles, a clever and engaging sort of thing.

"Me, Agent Graham; you show them to me."

When he sees Will out from a second door used for patient exits, Will goes to return the books he'd thumbed through. He's surprised when Dr. Lecter refuses, instead pushing them back towards Will's chest with that same damned, ambiguous smile he wore for the rest of their conversation.

"Please, Agent Graham, you've certainly earned the time and leisure to look through those as you like. Return them when you've found what you're looking for."

Later, setting them alongside Beverly's tablet with Dr. Lecter's articles in the journals, he wonders what exactly he's looking for that the good doctor seems to know everything about.

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He gets coffee with Alana because she insists, and because she's a good enough friend he'd hate to disappoint or worry her. It's a small shop that deserves more customers than it has, what with the fair prices and elegant, old-fashioned way of making coffee, but Will is glad for it. It's just them, the woman running the counter, and a couple tucked into the corner with their Sudoku and their crosswords.

"Hannibal tells me he's met with you a few times," she says, stirring a chai latte. Time has made it so that he hardly has to look at her to see what she's feeling or thinking. Relief

and pleasure are a film on the table that wasn't quite wiped clean.

"Yes."

"Has it helped?"

"Did you know about his ability to be unread by empaths?" Will wonders out loud. He doesn't have to wait for an answer. He glances to her mouth, sees the guilt at keeping what she'd consider a secret. "I didn't ask, therefore you didn't tell me."

"I figured you wouldn't believe until you saw," she says with a nod.

"That's true."

"Has it helped, Will?" she presses when he says nothing else. "He went with you when you went to the RA's home."

"That's his house, but it's not his home. There's somewhere else he keeps his secrets."

That's how it was with empaths, although the look of confusion on Alana's face tells him she doesn't quite follow his train of thought. Dreamers in particular, like Dolarhyde, are trained to build walls, to create safe spaces within safe spaces. Although he couldn't hide his fear, he could build enough walls with his dreams that he could hide his secrets and save them for another place.

"Jack is getting me information regarding what he was working on before he went rogue, and another agent sent me an address to a place he liked to frequent between jobs," he continues rather than explain what he meant. "Dr. Lecter wants to follow along."

He doesn't reveal that he doesn't mind as much as he thought he would, Lecter's following along. After visiting Dolarhyde's house, he didn't say much over coffee, allowing Will to mull over what he'd felt and seen. Someone betrayed Dolarhyde, that much was certain –whether on purpose or not, he couldn't say, but it was a betrayal all the same. After their conversation at Lecter's office, his ability to *know* that Will enjoyed killing Hobbs, there is a sense of something odd, something alluring in the manner in which he tracked Will throughout his office, gleaning more information from Will than Will thought he'd gained from Lecter.

It was a little exciting, if he was being completely honest with himself.

"He's worked with empaths before, and he was my mentor in school. Apart from his professional recommendations, I put my stamp on him."

It means more to him that she recommends him than anyone else, although he's not sure if he should say that. His level of comfort around certain people is something he holds close, not using words to express how much or little someone means to him. That creates vulnerability, and Will has had enough with vulnerability, with letting too much in. He's had to share a bed with two dead bodies; he doesn't want to imagine a third, one alive and needing validation of his friendship.

“He’s smart,” he allows after he finishes his coffee. “I read his work.”

“All of it?”

He doesn’t want to admit that *yes*, of course he’d read every single published piece. “A bit. He seems to understand empaths differently than others. He doesn’t fear us.”

“People don’t fear empaths,” she says, but at his cross look, she amends hastily, “at least, not the way you imply. No one likes their secrets being exposed by a simple glance. No one likes thinking that if someone touches them, they know everything.”

“No one likes an empath going rogue and killing people,” he says sarcastically.

“You’ll find your RA,” Alana assures him.

“I was talking about me.”

That takes her by mild surprise, and she has to think about his words for awhile before she can find something to say to try and comfort him. Will isn’t looking for comfort, though; when he gets a call from Jack to meet him at a crime scene, he figures he’s looking for something similar to comfort, but something that doesn’t ache so much on the way down.

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It’s an open field with tall grass swaying in the wind, a cool breeze to whisper the cold day that it’s going to be. Will takes his jacket off and rolls up his shirt sleeves to really bask in the feeling of the environment around him, and he picks his way around a few vehicles to walk along a path stamped down from use. There isn’t a cloud in the sky, and the sun bears down on his gloved hands. When a bit of stray wheat dances and brushes against his arm, he can feel the pressure of a grasshopper leaping, of a doe rushing with wild panic. He twitches away from it and continues on his path.

Jack has had enough time to make sure the crime scene is ‘safe’ for him, and Will steps around a few police officers in order to take in the scene. It’s a bit nauseating, and the coffee roils in his stomach, but he forces himself to look because that’s his job and that’s what he does so wonderfully well.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the annotator tells him.

Sometimes he wonders if it’s a test from the FBI, the things he’s seen and the death he’s witnessed secondhand. Surely no one would take a young woman and throw her onto the head of a stag; surely the FBI merely wants to test his mettle, his obedience to them when they ask him to look at things like this. As he circles her, arms splayed in supplication to the heavens above, he knows that such thoughts are nothing but paranoia, though –he’s seen enough into the hearts and minds of mankind to know that there are plenty of people that, given half the chance, would eat someone alive if it got them one step ahead.

He inhales the stench of open wounds, of a chest cavity missing a vital piece for life, and after removing his gloves, he presses his hands into the blood, throwing walls down

rather than letting them fall on their own time.

You are nothing.

You think of yourself rather highly, as any with privilege does; this is not so, though. Through these actions of mine, I've reduced you to what you truly are –a pig, as easy to kill as the swine to the slaughter, as malleable as clay as I slice down your chest and break past the ribs to remove what gives life anew through each breath. Are we not more than flesh and bone? Yes, yes; as life was so given to you, I take away and give myself at my leisure, at my pleasure.

Will opens his eyes, and the woman before him –Cassie Boyle, his mind provides – still lives. She struggles, but he holds tight, and brown eyes meet his with the sort of panic and fear one gives when they know just how close they dance the line to death.

He doesn't smile at her, nor does he taunt her. His actions are methodical, as smooth and unhesitating as one ties a shoe. With strength, with utmost precision he lifts her and slams her onto the stag head, and the screams of agony that rip through her invigorate him, embolden him. As she flails and tries to free herself, a knife is produced and the clean, forced line down her chest is one of time, of practice and strength. Her screams turn to whimpers, to gasping chokes as her brain struggles to comprehend what is happening –

-Will needs no such effort, though; he knows exactly what he is doing as he does it.

The lungs are removed, and along his hands he sees gloves and an odd, vinyl suit over a nondescript black top. With finesse, he removes them and stares down at wide eyes and a gaping mouth, a body struggling to provide what it no longer can. The contrast of skin to blood, of bone to gore is empowering, and in her final moments of life, as her heart shudders and struggles, Will stares down and imagines just how beautiful the backdrop of the field around them set to the woman impaled on the horns, her purpose nothing more than to provide a contrast to Garrett Jacob Hobbs and a freshly prepared meal.

Can't you see, Agent Graham? This is the sort of thing you have the capacity to be.

He comes to and takes several steps back, grasping for a wet rag that's provided by someone he can't see, stuck as he is blinking back the sensation of what lungs feel like in gloved hands, what bones feel like jutting through skin. He lifts his walls in his mind, raises them high, but they fight him for longer than he likes, and he has to use another rag to fully remove all of what he's consumed through his skin.

"What'd you see?" Jack asks him. The annotator stands nearby, pen poised over the notepad. Will gasps and inhales sharply, closing his eyes tight for several furious heartbeats.

"…This is for me," he murmurs, and his voice is half-strangled.

"You?"

"It isn't Dolarhyde," he says, and he opens his eyes to look at Jack. "That's why you called, isn't it? You thought it was Dolarhyde?"

“Who is it?”

“I didn’t see that,” he says, and once his hands are sufficiently clean, he holds the rag out and someone takes it from him, allowing him to put his gloves back on with jerky, curt movements. “Intelligent psychopath, a sadist; not one I’ve seen before. He removed the victim’s lungs while she was alive, after he impaled her on the antlers. He’s either eaten, or he’s going to eat the lungs.”

“Eat the lungs,” Jack repeats flatly.

“He sees her as a pig. He sees all of us as pigs, and he wanted to show me that.”

“Why you?” Jack presses. “Is it another empath? Another rogue?”

“No, this…this person knows about me. About what happened with Hobbs, I think. Hobbs impaled women on antlers, so he impaled this woman on antlers.” He scrambles to try and think, to focus past the chill down his spine at someone that spoke so vividly to him. “He…asked me if I could see.”

“He asked you?”

“He did this with me in mind, Jack. He did this to get at me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Will snaps, and he thinks of the last line before he was able to pull himself away. He should tell Jack what the voice said, dissonant, faraway, but he can’t quite bring himself to. *This is the sort of thing you have the capacity to be.*

He doesn’t tell Jack. He doesn’t want Hansen called in. He doesn’t want a therapist, god *forbid* a review of his mental state if they think he’s getting too close to the edge. He surprised, then, to hear Hannibal Lecter of all people say,

“Could it be that there is a copycat or a protégé, Agent Crawford? Someone that Agent Hobbs worked with?”

Will turns his head to look, and the person holding the bloodstained, wet rags is Dr. Lecter of all people, gloved and dressed for the cooler weather.

“Could be,” Jack admits, and he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s not Dolarhyde? You’re sure?”

“That’s not Dolarhyde; the tone is different. Dolarhyde seemed purposeful, in control, but this…this was methodical. This was planned, and he was amused the entire time, like it was some kind of punchline to some great big joke.”

“Are you going to have Agent Graham look into it?” Dr. Lecter asks. Someone nearby reaches for the rags in his hands and disappears with them. Will tracks the movements, studies the flex and twist of Lecter’s wrists as he turns them behind his back casually.

“Oh, no,” Jack says before Will can speak. “Agent Graham works with RA’s if we can help it. He only gets these guys if we’re in way over our heads.”

“An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist, is very hard to catch,” Will says, and he chances a glance back to her body, splayed out and vulgar in its expression. “You have to wait for them to make a mistake, leave something that an empath can see beyond the thoughts and impressions.”

“We’ll have a Feeler ghost along the stag head and the surrounding area, see what comes up,” Jack says, and that’s Will’s sign to leave. He’s not *just* a Feeler, and he won’t have to deal with the case unless they’re in over their heads.

Instead, he’s got Dolarhyde to keep him busy. He’s not sure which is the better trade-off.

“Do you have information about his cases?” he asks Jack.

“Director Purnell told me that she’d e-mail you,” Jack promised. An evasive answer, and Will takes it sullenly.

Dr. Lecter follows him to his vehicle as he signs out from the crime scene, and they pause near the driver’s door, Will sneaking short, quick glances and the good doctor gazing with steady intent.

“…Are they going to have you at every single scene I go to?” Will asks warily.

“For the time being,” he replies lightly.

“That a sign they don’t have any faith in me?”

“It’s a sign that they want you to make a healthy, smooth recovery from the trauma you endured,” Lecter says, and at Will’s scoffing, indignant bark of laughter, he continues, “Where there was a stag head involved, they had suspicions it was a tie to Agent Hobbs, and they wanted to ensure you wouldn’t have a flashback of any sort to the previous incident.”

“I didn’t,” Will snaps.

“Didn’t you?”

“No, this was nothing like Hobbs,” he says, waving a hand at Lecter’s amused expression. “Don’t give me that look, this was…Hobbs loved those girls. He wouldn’t disrespect them like this. He wouldn’t be vulgar, cruel. He thought their deaths were quick and merciful, but this guy…this guy was happy to relish in her pain. He knew the cuts to make, the way to turn her at just the right angle that she was impaled rather than falling against the antlers and sliding to the side. He…relished in her screaming.”

Will is careful to speak slowly, that he can ensure that he says ‘he’ rather than ‘I’.

“A foil to Agent Hobbs?”

“A foil to Agent Hobbs,” Will agrees. “And…and a jab at me. Whoever they are, they’re jabbing at me.”

“Does that make you feel threatened, Agent Graham?” Lecter wonders. In the brilliant sunlight of the crisp fall day, his hair holds golden hues, his skin alive and positively glowing. Will studies his expression, the way that his eyes can only take in what he can see rather than what’s behind the face.

“…No. If anything, I-” He stops himself before he can say anything stupid, before he can say something he’ll regret. Dr. Lecter tilts his head slightly, prompting.

“You what, Agent Graham?” he prompts.

Will swallows, glances back to the scene in the short distance, agents hurrying to and fro, another empath standing off to the side and waiting, their back to the scene. He grimaces, adjusts his glasses that slide down his nose no matter how hard he tries to fix them, and he lets out a short, forlorn sigh.

“If anything, I’d say they’re trying to play a game with me,” he says at last. To his surprise, Dr. Lecter doesn’t bother to attempt to correct him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of the love this has gotten! With 3 of my other fics finished, I am feeling so pumped about this one! :)

I've never really worked in a present tense, but I felt that it was more fitting for this character/world. That sense that it's discussed now and done now because there's no guarantee of tomorrow. Idk.

Where Terror Roams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6:

The address the Feeler gave him was to a small film developing business towards the outside of town. As a hobby, Agent Dolarhyde –the **RA**, Will tells himself –developed and worked with film in his spare time. He spoke very little to some people, said nothing to most; it isn't until he's let into a room whose lights are completely turned off that he finds someone whose willing *and* able to give him information regarding the RA.

"Oh, I knew Mr. D. Really swell guy," the woman says in the quiet hum of technology and the inconsistent and sporadic squeaks of an office chair. "He really knew his stuff about film development. At one point, he was able to capture photos with infrared lenses and got them taken care of here."

"Did he have his own office?" Will asks. He likes the quiet of the developing room, the utter darkness around them as she continues to work, regardless of his questions. Her life doesn't stop just because someone else's does –film needs developed, processed, and distributed. Reba McClane does it all and more.

"He worked in here with me, as a matter of fact," she says. "He did a good job, and I needed a guy like that."

"What sort of person was he?"

At that she doesn't answer, and he hears the chair squeak in his direction. The darkness makes his skin sensitive to the touch, his ears quick to catch the smallest of sounds. He wonders what his skin would tell him, dare he press it to the work tables Agent Dolarhyde frequented.

In the darkness he can't see, but in the darkness he knows he'd be able to feel.

"What is this?" Reba asks after a prolonged silence. To anyone else, it would have been uncomfortable, but it wasn't for Will.

"Miss McClane, I'm Agent Will Graham," he says. "We are attempting to track Agent Dolarhyde because-"

"Because he's an empath, and he went rogue?" she guesses. It's a good guess, and Will stares in the direction of her voice, mouth puckered at her knowing tone.

"What do you know?" he asks.

"Not as much as it sounds like I do," she admits. "He told me what he did –Mr. D tracked empaths for the FBI and observed them. If they behaved in a way that made it sound

like they were going to do something nasty to themselves or someone else, he reported it to his boss, and they took care of the empath." At Will's almost stunned silence, she continues, "If his work wasn't done good enough –if he didn't *see* enough –then they eventually went rogue, and that's when someone like you comes along, right?"

"…Right."

The fact that she's aware of his job at the FBI floors Will, and he clings to that knowledge because it's a start, and it's a really, *really* good start.

"So when he started acting a bit funny and a bit cross, I asked him." Her voice shifts, and there is a sound of something blunt, tapered, dragging and tapping along the floor. "He says, maybe he doesn't do his job as well, and maybe they wonder what he's good for? If someone like you always comes along, is there someone like him *watching* someone like him?"

Will twitches, nodding along at that train of thought. It's not far-fetched, and if Dolarhyde's mind is truly shifting and falling in on itself, it's a perfectly logical worry. "Did he give you anything more than that?"

"He said that he was losing time," she says, and it's mournful. He can taste the pain in the air. "He said he felt that time was slipping out of his hands."

That in of itself is another handhold, and he grabs onto it, taking a step forward. His shoe brushes the thing that had tapped and slid across the floor to him, and both of them freeze, close enough that he can smell her hand lotion –Freesia and Lavender.

"…May I touch your hands?" he asks quietly.

"Are you tired of being blind?" she asks, and something about it seems funny to her.

"I want to help him," he replies, and it seems to reverberate in the room. Help. Help like he helped Hobbs, only he helped Hobbs by killing him. Help like he helped Abigail, only she was sleeping so deep they didn't know when she'd wake.

"You can touch my hands, Agent Graham," she says, and there is a fumbling of cloth, of shifting and adjusting before she holds them out to him. "I don't know if you'll really find what you're looking for, though."

He removes his gloves and tucks them away, patting at the darkness before him helplessly before he finds her hands, and without preparation he's falling in, tumbling over and over and over as before he was blind and now can *see.*

My head presses to the tiger, feels its deep breaths as its chest lifts, then compresses, lifts then compresses. Fingers tight, taut in the fur, holding onto a power that radiates from nose to tail, an elegance as it lays sprawled, vulnerable but safe. Fingers glide, feel along the ribs, then the spine.

Gentle, hushed whispers of excitement as teeth the size of the index finger are caressed, and there is a gasp to the left, a breath of air that draws in taut then holds. They are as awed as I am, as gentle as I am –

-They do not guide with hands touching, assuming, but rather let my own feet step with my own life and my own knowledge. They do not coddle but lift, support, allow my breath to be my own. Hands that make touch a form of delicacy, expression of admiration rather than supposition of my failings; hands that know the shape of my lips by tracing, that know the curve of my hip only after asking –

-Hands that hold, hands that shift and love, hands that say goodbye. I stand but cannot see, hear but cannot speak because he is gone, and the absence in the room after is enough that I wish to prick it with a needle, let the air out slow enough to burn –

-Brick walls my hands glide across, known from habit, known from memory. I hum, tuneless, and there is the smell of ricotta in the air from the restaurant down the street. He took me there, once, when he first had the boldness to ask me. We were happy. We were happy.

Will lets go of her hands and quickly gloves his, rubbing them against his sides to ingrain his skin into the leather and outside of her head, her past. He swallows so hard that it hurts, and if he had enough voice, he'd have asked for water. He doesn't, though; he stands still in the silence that tastes how heartbreak feels, and he knows Reba McClane far better than anyone else in the entire world.

Anyone else, that is, except for Dolarhyde.

"He didn't register the two of you in a relationship," he says quietly. His voice is almost drowned out by the humming of the equipment.

"I didn't want him to," she replies. "He told me about that work rule, and I said that I didn't care what the FBI wanted me to do. They may keep track of empaths, but they have no business keeping track of me."

"Why show me now, then?"

She's quiet at that, and Will finds the silence and the darkness as stifling as it is freeing. He admires that she doesn't hesitate to put him at her level, to make him have to reach out in order to *know*. She's quick, she's clever, and if the way she fearlessly put her face beside a tiger's fangs is any indication, Will knows exactly why Dolarhyde loves her.

"Because I believe you when you say that you want to help," she says at last.

"I do," Will affirms.

"He's mentioned you enough times that when they said it was you wanting to come and speak to me, I thought that I'd better listen."

He doesn't say anything to that because he doesn't want to give anything away. He's floored by it, though, floored by the thought of Dolarhyde knowing him enough to speak about him –speaking about him often enough for her to recognize him. He makes a hasty escape after passing his card to her in the dark, and the light outside in the hallway blinds him, so much so that he has to stand and blink stupidly at the wall across from him for a while before he can leave.

Maybe he doesn't do his job as well, and maybe they wonder what he's good for?

Is there someone like him watching someone like him?

As he makes his way outside and drives back towards HQ, he wonders something very much the same about himself.

-

Alana and Dr. Lecter are waiting for him when he gets there, and he takes his time getting out of the car in order to mentally prepare himself. With two of them waiting, there's something happening, and it's enough of a happening that even a quick glance to Alana's face tells him.

"Abigail Hobbs has woken up?" he asks without truly needing to ask. Alana's mouth purses at him not waiting to be told, and she glances to Hannibal. Will glances, too, although he gets as much information from it as Alana does –that is to say, not much at all.

"She has," Alana says gently. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"I haven't," Will replies. "I'll go get my case files."

"Let's get lunch."

"I want to get my case files," he says, and he makes a move to go around her. He likes to pretend that he needs the case files to know Abigail Hobbs; that he needs to read ink on paper to understand everything that's happened to her. He doesn't, though; as much as he knows himself, he knows Abigail Hobbs, and he thinks that the case files will protect him from the onslaught of looking into the eyes of a girl whose father he murdered –a man that almost killed the both of them in one fell swoop.

"Will," Alana starts, and she reaches out to touch his jacket, briefly. Her hands are also gloved, although it's against the chill of the air rather than to protect herself.

He pauses to look down at her fingers, and she retracts them guiltily. Even through layers of cloth, he has no desire to be touched.

"Agent Crawford wishes to ask her a few questions and needs you present to ascertain her honesty," Dr. Lecter says, and Will looks from Alana's gloves to Lecter's face.

"What?"

“He has suspicions that she may have helped her father at some point. Those girls all attended the schools she’d taken tours of for university, and he just needs to know whether or not she was an accessory,” Alana says. Their playing off of one another is surely scripted, and it makes his lip curl.

“An *accessory*?” Will scoffs. “She was almost murdered by Agent Hobbs, and you think she was an *accessory* to his crimes?”

“It’s possible,” Lecter says congenially. “Although, it’s entirely possible that she wasn’t.”

“That’s why he’s requesting you. You were far enough involved with the RA that you’ll be able to tell his mark on his daughter,” Alana adds.

“With two psychiatrists and an E-3 empath, we’ll surely be able to figure it out,” Lecter adds. Will looks to him in time to see a small, fleeting smile, and it’s not lost on him that there’s a tinge of sarcasm laced in his words. It makes the entire thing less of an insult, to see that sort of humor; like the good doctor is just as disgusted, just as affronted at the thought that it’d take all three of them to piece something like that together.

“You’re there to ensure I don’t have a relapse when I look at her, and Dr. Bloom is there to make sure I’m impartial,” he says to him, turning back around to head towards his car. “If it makes you feel better, Dr. Lecter, it’s not *your* opinion Jack is uncertain of.”

Alana doesn’t correct him because she’s the honest sort that won’t lie when he’s hit the mark. They drive to the hospital in silence, save for the light, mildly static-sounding notes of the classic rock station gracing them with a guitar solo. When they get there, he realizes that he’s forgotten his case notes, and he sits in the car for several moments, debating the pros and cons of going back to get it.

“If it’s too much, today,” Alana begins.

That decides it for him. He gets out and heads into the hospital.

The place smells like funeral flowers and salt from tears. He basks in the sensation of a thousand hearts all at different intervals –some slow, staggered, others racing and terrified – and he makes his way towards her room, nodding to two nuerotypical agents waiting just by the doors. He averts his gaze, and they do, too.

Inside of the room, there are a few cards on a stand and a few vases. The girl sitting up in bed doesn’t seem interested in them, though. Nervous hands pluck at a blanket while a nurse bustles about, taking notes on her clipboard, and at the sound of their footsteps she looks up with glassy, distant eyes.

Without prompt, he finds himself tumbling inside of them.

“Hello, Abigail,” Alana says in greeting when Will doesn’t speak. He can’t speak, distracted as he is by the way her skin feels like his own, the way her eyes reflect his own to show him his demons inside. His neck hurts, *aches* from its abuse, and he wonders when it’s

alright to ask for pain medicine again. Why, *why* now –why now? Grief and hunger alike sitting perched on the tip of their tongue, and is it too much to ask for a sip of water without someone checking my temperature?

"Hello," Abigail says, and Will mouths the words with her, knows them like they were his own design. They are, though, aren't they? He feels uncertain, scared, and at the scent of a secret, walls suddenly rise up, fast and furious as he's slammed back into his own consciousness where he is himself again and distinctly not Abigail Hobbs.

"My name is Alana Bloom, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and that is-"

"I know you," Abigail interrupts, staring at Will. He pins his gaze to her neck, where the gauze is neatly pressed to hide the abuse underneath. "You killed my father."

He checks the pulse at his wrist, to time the heartbeats and reassure himself that he's Will Graham. "Yes," he manages from hoarse lips.

"He was going to harm you," Dr. Lecter says when Will adds nothing else. "Therefore, Agent Graham felt it best to help."

"He was going to kill me, you mean," she corrects slowly. She tries to sound brave, but the tone is all wrong.

"Yes," Will finds himself repeating.

"He killed my mother," she tacks on. Will doesn't find it important to agree; she saw it, saw the entire thing as her world quite suddenly tipped over and fell down, sundered by hands that held too tight and didn't know how to let her go. He nods, and she looks down to her busy hands tugging at loose threads.

"Agent Graham is an empath that works for the FBI, like your father did, Abigail," Alana says when no one else speaks. Her voice is gentle, kind. "I consult with the FBI on occasion, but my specialty lies in childhood trauma and family counseling. Dr. Lecter works with a myriad of patients with special disorders or traumas, and Agent Graham-"

"-hunts rogue empaths," Abigail interrupts again. Her lip tremors despite how blasé she's attempting to sound, and there is an odd twist to her expression as she blanches and looks down again. "He knew you were looking for him."

"Did he?" Will asks without having to.

"Oh, yes," she says distantly. If she has her way, Will figures she can shred the blanket to pieces before the day is through. "He told me, 'I left work to see you graduate, but they won't like it. They're going to send Agent Graham after me, and if he finds me then he's going to take me away from you.'"

"I'm sorry, Abigail," he says.

"He said that you were the only known E-3 not in an institution."

"I am," he agrees.

"He didn't stay at the house, you know. I don't know where he stayed, but he'd just… show up sometimes, drop in. Is that what you're here for? You want to know about him? You need to question me?" She looks back up at that, although she won't meet his gaze. There is something in the action, though, something that makes Will step forward and sit down in the chair near the bed without invitation. Abigail tracks the moment without looking at his face.

"Only if you're comfortable discussing it," Alana says lightly. "If you aren't comfortable with that right now, that's okay, too. First and foremost, we just wanted to see how you were doing."

It's a pretty bad lie, and Will wonders if Abigail can sense that. Why bring three of them to her room –two psychiatrists and the man that hunted her father –if it was a courtesy call? His lip twitches, and he rests his palms on his knees.

"No, I'm…okay. I know they're all dead. The nurses wouldn't tell me anything, so I said I couldn't remember, but I know they're all dead and I'm the only one left. If I don't say something, someone else will, right? They'll say it for me, even if it's not the truth?"

"That is an unfortunate potential in cases like this," Hannibal says. He sits down on the chair at the end of the bed, but Will doesn't quite react to it, not like he reacts to the way her mouth seems to move whether she realizes it or not, twisting and curling in on something that he thinks is a secret.

Look at me, he thinks, coaxing. *Look at me and show me.*

He doesn't think Abigail Hobbs can read minds, but she can feel his eyes on her. A tremor works its way down her spine, and she looks over at him, a brief flick of her gaze.

That's all he needs.

He's falling in on himself, but he's not himself anymore; he never was and never will be again. Twisting, hurtling, and when he slams to the concrete ground of a university campus, the wind is knocked out of him.

No, no; not him, *her*.

"Oh my god, are you alright?" a girl asks, and she's helping me, helping me stand, helping me brush gravel from jeans faded in only the most fashionable of ways. There's a rip on the side that was made intentionally, before I ever even owned them, and the girl admires the wash for a moment before she smiles and meets my gaze.

I don't meet *her* gaze, though. I'm not stupid. My dad raised me better than that.

"Just a stumble," I say, and it's as smooth and rehearsed as it's always been. That's what this is, though, isn't it? A script? A play? A scene where I play the smallest but most important part? Over her shoulder, I spy him sitting at a bench, watching us over a magazine of *Guns and Ammo*. It's discreet. It's perfect.

Bile rises in the back of my throat, and I swallow it.

"Jeez, that was a bad stumble! Are you new here? There's a lot of kids on campus, but I recognize most faces."

"I'm touring the campus for next Fall semester," I say, and I roll my eyes good-naturedly. "I thought it was early, but my dad said it's best to get an early start."

"He's right, though! See as many as you can, travel around as much, really find your place, you know?"

"I know," I try to reassure her.

"My name's Denise."

"Abigail."

"Good to meet you! Have you found your tour group yet?" I shake my head, and she nods, ponytail bouncing. "Let me show you where they're at, 'kay? This place is easy to get turned around at."

"Thanks," I say with such sincerity that it makes her beam. It's then, as we walk side by side and chat about studies, that I glance to the side and meet her eyes.

I don't fall in –my dad taught me better than that.

Instead, I see the facts, listed along the iris, like bits of data I extract and place to the side for later. I see age, birthday, insecurities of weight, address, family, and pets. I see heartbreaks, crushes, friends, enemies, and a professor that won't let up.

The most crucial, relieving part of the entire experience is that I don't even have to remember it all. I just have to store it within my mind, so that he can peer within the walls that protect me and extract it for himself later.

Otherwise, I'll be honored the way the rest of them were.

He's gone; he can't hurt you, he can't hurt you. I'm safe, but why do they stare? Why is she staring so intently? I can't look at them all, can't see them, otherwise he'll know, he'll know, he'll ***know****...*

Will Graham comes back into his own skin with a startling clarity. The membrane against his sinew, blood, and bone is thin, and he wonders just how hard he'd have to push to tear it. Could he peel it back, layer by layer, see each painstaking centimeter and know it for what it was?

At this moment, he is very aware of the wall between Abigail Hobbs and Will Graham. He is very much aware because he knows that she consciously put it there.

She's an empath.

“Agent Graham?” Alana’s voice pulls him from the intent stare that he’s fixated upon Abigail. Time and enough experience have given him the tools to school his face, and it’s with a calm, resigned expression that he looks to Alana and Hannibal. There is no shock. There is no surprise. There is no fear.

Abigail Hobbs, though, positively reeks with it.

“She’s not lying,” he says slowly. It eases from him, smooth and sure with a hint of an old, Southern accent. It’s a tell, in truth, but not one that they’d pick up on easily.

He’s not quite sure the discussion they had while he tried to delve into the recesses of her mind, but his statement is met with a nod from Alana and the briefest of lip twitches from Dr. Lecter. He looks from them to Abigail, and the expression she gives him is one of such utmost relief and terror that he thinks he’ll suffocate on it if he’s not careful.

“Would you like to go for a walk, Abigail?” he offers.

Just like that, her expression shutters as she tries to gauge his reasoning. Guarded. Wary.

“I’ll ask a nurse if they’ll allow it,” Alana says, and she walks out of the room after giving Hannibal a pointed look.

Hannibal Lecter, for all intents and purposes, seems to be on a similar wavelength. He stands, adjusts his suitcoat, and murmurs something about refreshment just down the hall. The look he gives Will as he steps out is something that reeks of a mild case of recklessness, and he runs with it, grabs it and shakes it like a rabbit caught in his maw.

He turns to Abigail the moment that the door closes, tense. “You’re a Seer.”

“You can’t tell them,” Abigail pleads. Without Alana and Lecter watching, the taut turn of her shoulders caves, leaves her looking well and truly fragile. “You can’t.”

“We have, at best, forty seconds before Dr. Bloom returns, one hundred and twenty before Dr. Lecter does, Abigail Hobbs,” he says. “Why did your father hide you?”

“He said they’d do to me what they did to him,” she whispers.

“What’d they do?” Will presses. He leans in with it, resists the urge to take hold of her. The wall between them is too thick, too pronounced, and he wonders just how long she’s practiced keeping herself hidden from people like him.

“They took him to the EA, made him think he was only useful with the FBI,” she replies. “Made him think he was only useful when he helped the law.”

“He made you useful,” Will says pointedly.

“If I didn’t, he’d have killed me, too.”

“Either way, you were used.”

"Are you going to tell them?" she asks, and before he can react, before he can even think what his next step will be, she's grabbing him by the forearm, hauling him just close enough to press their foreheads together. "Please, *please* don't tell them."

He finds himself falling in again.

"You don't have to do this, dad, please," I beg, but the words fall useless, useless like mom's body as it lays on the kitchen floor, useless like the dead leaves we churn through as he drags me along.

"Shh, sh," he soothes, the sound he used to make near horses.

My heart pounds; with each beat, it tells me that this is how I die. This, in all of its horror and terror and fear, is how I die.

I did what was asked, but in the end we all return to dust. In the end, we are all food for the things that crawl beneath the earth.

He is in the cabin, but the angle is wrong, twisted. He does not face Abigail and her father, poised with a knife. Will Graham instead sees himself, but not as one would see a mirror; he is different, feral, and wild. He is a stranger, and the gun he levels at them is lethal.

"P-please," Will hears himself say, but he's not Will Graham. He's Abigail, and they are in dire need of help. Everything has gone wrong, all wrong.

The knife bites, claws into them, and they feel it with the force of memory, of betrayal. Loud, repetitive pops litter the air, and the sensation of hitting the floor is lost in the wake of an ocean of pain that sweeps over them, staggering.

He appears in their fading vision, although this time he is terrified, terrified as bare hands press to skin, and they feel it as they connect to this man whose pupils encase the entire iris, a singular entity that exists as a whole, where there is no end or beginning. His cries of terror, of pain mask theirs, leave them spiraling down, down, down where there is a sort of darkness in giving in, a sort of pleasure in giving up. He will take the trials of the living and leave them to return to dust.

The barrier is put in place between them once more; he can feel it slide between them, a partition between their minds that she can put there with little thought. He jerks from her hold and stares at her red-rimmed eyes, her bandage newly clean and freshly applied, and he's only barely aware of the shuddering breaths that rip from his colorless lips.

"If you tell them, you'll kill us," she insists, and Will finds himself nodding along with her because they are one in the same, Will and Abigail, two halves of a singular whole. "They can't know or else we'll die. You feel it, don't you? When you touched my skin that day, we became one?"

"We'll die," Will agrees, and he presses his fingertips to his eyelids, knocking his glasses askew.

“Please help us, Agent Graham. You’re the only one that can keep both you and me safe.”

And Will Graham agrees, mouth pressed tight as he revisits that scene, feels the blade parting his skin, only this time he’s staring up into his own eyes wide with horror, and he’s begging him to save them both.

“Don’t worry, Abigail. I’ll keep us safe.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your support! I can never say it enough. You guys are great! Check out a few announcements on the tumblr for some exciting things happening within a day or so! :D

Where Hearts Go to Quiet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7:

He sits by the river, fishing pole in one hand and a flask in the other. As he fishes, he finds himself revisiting the same scene over and over and over again in his head, and it's enough of an imposition that he is more than lucky that he brought two flasks instead of one –god almighty, why hadn't he brought the entire fifth to the river? Why had he left so much behind?

Alana was going to be *so* upset with him when she finally got him to answer the phone.

In truth, he could have handled his departure from the hospital far better than he did. He didn't *have* to stand so fast he toppled his chair over, and he certainly hadn't meant to barrel from the room so quickly he knocked a nurse into Hannibal. At least Hannibal had been able to catch her before she fell into a surprised and concerned Alana. The water hadn't been saved, though, but he's certain no one gave a second thought to the water dropping and splattering everywhere. No matter the protests tossed his way, furious heels on tile close behind him, he found himself all but running from the hospital, hailing the first taxi by stepping directly in front of it so that it had no choice but to stop for him.

All in all, a rather dramatic getaway. If he was in control of himself, he'd have left with far better finesse, enough that no one asked questions, enough that when he returned to work he wouldn't have to deal with Jack.

He takes another pull from the flask, contemplating the fact that he wasn't in control of himself then, and he certainly isn't in control now. He hopes no one tells Jack.

When the fish tugs on the line, he hauls it up with slow, careful turns of the reel, setting the flask down to give it his full attention. Sometimes, when nights are too quiet and dreams are too far, he finds himself thinking of his childhood, of the way he'd cried when his father once killed a fish in front of him. He doesn't have many memories of his childhood, seeing as how his empathy was an early discovery. The memories he has locked away within the stream of consciousness in his mind sometimes blur the way old photos do, discolored and lacking details. Other times, though, they slide along the water with sharp clarity, so much so that it startles him with how each color fights against the other for attention, clear and bold and so utterly painful with the way he can only see the whole thing if he stands far enough away from it.

His father hit the fish on a rock, and nerves kept it moving for many minutes after. He threw up later, thinking about it, the scales in the sunlight and the eyes that didn't close. He was glad he hadn't touched the fish, otherwise he'd have felt its death –luck, he told himself,

after he knew what it was to be an empath, to feel the world within your skin. It was luck that day that kept him from feeling the sensation of death at only four-years-old.

Now, he hauls the fish up with gloved hands and unhooks it, holding its curving and twisting body firmly before he sets it back down into the water and allows it to swim away. He sets the fishing pole aside and takes another swig from his flask, feeling the alcohol burn all the way down to warm his stomach.

Will Graham has a problem.

By law, empaths have to report to the EA. Each and every empath in the United States are registered, trained to handle their gift so that they can be useful members of society. In the eyes of the law, Will is committing a felony by not reporting Abigail, but anytime he considers picking up the phone, a dose of fear rushes through his veins and makes him freeze, so much so that he is more than sure he's having a low-grade anxiety attack.

He can't report Abigail. He has to keep them safe.

Safe from who, though? Her father is dead. Will Graham shot him.

It was a brilliant plan on Hobbs' part, if Will is being particularly honest with himself. As he catches and releases several more fish, muscles loosening their taut hold the more he drinks, he admits to himself that Agent Hobbs was clever, hiding his daughter from the FBI and the EA. She was his treasure, the line of empathy following through his blood to hers, and he protected it by using himself as a shield and complying wholeheartedly with the FBI. Until he began killing those other girls, no one suspected that he would lie to the FBI. No one suspected he would use his daughter to hunt innocent people.

Will knows now, though. By keeping quiet he is, in his own right, an accomplice.

He can't turn on her, though. As he packs his things away hours later and heads back to his house to make supper, he makes another admission to himself, one that acknowledges how cleverly she turned his gifts on himself. He'd never seen a Seer use their power as a weapon quite like that, using their eyes and their skin to *make* him see –each time he thinks of her, there is a small part of him that thinks of himself. In her moment of fear, she made him touch her skin and become part of her whole, a world in which if he turned on her, he turned on himself, too. A world in which if she died, he died, too.

Hobbs, despite dying in the end, still somehow won. As long as Abigail remains a secret, there is a singular victory that he can be awarded, that he trained his daughter to be a hunter rather than a tool to be discarded when the FBI lost interest. Will can respect that, even as he fears just what it means for him should they ever find out.

-

He's hungover the next morning as he goes to his small office at the FBI, and it sits perched on the tip of his tongue, sour. Every time he exhales, his tongue curls at the taste of day old whiskey. He sips scalding coffee to chase it away, and he fires up his computer to

check e-mails. Director Purnell is supposed to reach out to him about Dolarhyde's work, so that he can plan the next step to hunt down Dolarhyde.

"Alana called Jack," Beverly says by way of greeting. She hovers near the door, waiting for an invitation to come in.

Will grunts, typing his password. It wasn't until later that he'd realized his glasses had fallen in his haste to escape the hospital, and he laments it now, missing the barrier between his eyes and the world. As the desktop boots up, he leans back in his chair and sighs.

"How angry is he?"

"Not any angrier than usual." She snorted at her own private joke. "He's in a meeting, but he wants to talk to you afterwards."

"What kind of trouble am I in?" he asks, looking over to her.

She finds his question odd, and he notes her wrinkled nose and head tilt as she adjusts herself. "None. He just wants more information about Hobbs."

None. She's not lying –even without his gifts, he'd know that. Beverly Katz is an honest person, from her quirky sense of self to her sharp observations at a crime scene. For a neurotypical, he's comfortable around her –as comfortable as he can be around people for extended periods of time.

She's waiting for him to explain why he thinks he's in trouble. He doesn't want that conversation with anyone, though, so when the desktop finally loads, he clicks impatiently on the e-mail icon, taking a long gulp from his coffee cup.

"Not a day for conversations?" she questions. Where others would wander away, disquieted by him, Beverly holds her ground. Will sighs and sets his coffee cup down.

"I'm hungover," he says curtly. Beverly's grin is wide, her amusement palpable against his skin.

"That kind of night?"

"The Hobbs girl woke up," he explains. At her nod, he continues irritably, "And hospitals are no good for me."

"Drinking alone?"

"Is that a question?"

She nods in agreement and ducks her head. "Not like you'd want the company, but drinking alone is a sign of alcoholism."

Her concern isn't just kindness. Alcoholism is a big no-no in the EBAU for empaths, right alongside rules against serial killing and keeping empaths a secret. Will nods in agreement and scratches his stubble, casting her an appreciative look.

"I'll call someone next time," he promises.

"It's not alcoholism if it's social," she quips. At Will's wry, waxen grin, she continues, "I just wanted to get back to you on Dolarhyde. They looked into the background of the victims, but nothing really jumps out. Mr. Perkins worked with pharmaceuticals, and his wife took care of the house and finances."

"Pharmaceuticals?"

"Yeah, he does a lot of work with psychiatrists, too. A lot of research facilities, testing, and distributing of anti-psychotics." She flips through a folder and sets a sheet on top, eyeing it. "I'll get copies of the file for you to look over. Maybe Dolarhyde got some bad medicine and lashed out?"

"Was he on any medication at the time?" Will asks. The thought feels like a thread he wishes to tug at and turn over in his hands.

"I'll double check his file, but I don't recall seeing anything. I mean, like I said before, Dolarhyde was a pretty calm guy. I wouldn't have expected him to go rogue."

"It's not always easy to pinpoint a potential RA," Will says. It's not so much to comfort her than it is to comfort himself.

"Hobbs was almost obvious. They just didn't expect him to…" Her voice trails off, and she clears her throat.

"Kill eight girls, his wife, and attempt to kill his daughter?" Will supplies when she doesn't finish.

"They don't always kill," she adds with a shrug.

"Dolarhyde does."

"Well, we set you on the case and you always find them." She smiles to reassure him. "So far, you've always found them."

Pleased, having said what she wanted, she sees herself out and closes the door for him so that he doesn't have to get up.

More than a little relieved that whatever Alana said to Jack, it's not damning, he opens one of the unread messages once he sees the subject line.

To: Agent Will Graham, EBAU, E-3

From: Director Kade Purnell, EI

Subject: Francis Dolarhyde

Director Crawford informed me of your interest in the RA, Francis Dolarhyde, and his investigations before the regrettable circumstances that occurred. It is my regret

to inform you that his work was classified with a clearance A-1 level necessary in order to access the files. Clearance that you do not have, Agent Graham. I will not give leave for you to obtain it.

I can assure you that the lack of knowledge of his work before becoming classed as an RA will not impede your current investigation regarding him. Continue to track his whereabouts so that he may receive the necessary treatment of an E-2 RA.

-Kade Purnell, Direct. EI

Will reads the e-mail once. As he glares at the page, it's not necessary to read a second time because the words feel imprinted on his eyes, ingrained in his skin.

I will not give leave for you to <u>obtain</u> it?

He finishes reading and responding to other e-mails less volatile than that one, and he forces himself to finish his coffee before he goes to find Jack, steps pressing down harshly on the thin carpet of the EBAU halls.

He strolls into his office without knocking, and Jack is surprised as he holds a phone to his ear. His gaze cuts sharp lines along Will's person, and whenever the speaker on the other line goes quiet, he lets out a quiet hum of affirmation. Will resists the urge to pace before him.

"I'll see what I can do." A pause as he listens. "Yes, that's fine…and I'm sorry, Agent Harris, but I'm going to have to call you back."

He hangs up, and Will wastes no time with posturing. "Director Purnell won't give me the clearance."

"It's clearly information you don't need to know to do your job, Will," Jack replies wearily. He's been waiting for Will to come to him, and Will can see it in the way he rolls his shoulders back to prepare for a lengthy discussion.

"Whatever it was that he was investigating, *that* is what set him off," Will fires back. "If I know what it is, what made him feel so betrayed, I can see where he'd go next, what he'd do!"

"Whatever it is, it's sensitive information that she's not willing to share." A pause. "Or she can't share."

"It's bull shit, Jack! I need to know what he was working on!"

"That's not your call!" Jack snaps in return. Whatever hesitations that Will had been able to pick at before are gone, and Jack's steel spine somehow manages to stiffen even more. "You're an E-3, but that doesn't give you special privileges!"

That stops Will, and he stares at Jack, hands gripping his hips so hard he hopes the skin bruises, turns the color of old banana peels. The anger he so easily displayed, so easily shared isn't so much dissipating as it's curling in on itself, breaking down something more usable because clearly showing it isn't fixing the problem. If anything, it's making Jack rise to the challenge.

"…I didn't realize you though that I was granted special privileges," he replies instead, coldly.

"Will-"

"What kind of privileges do you think I'm granted, Jack?" he asks, gritting his teeth. He's aware that it's more of a snarl than a smile, but he tries. "What sort of benefits do you think that I, as an empath, get to enjoy that you don't?"

"Don't," Jack warns him, and Will snorts.

"Come on, Jack," he chides. "Last I checked, you didn't have to register with the FBI when you were a child for being born a certain way. You didn't have to register Bella when you started dating her."

"I don't get to skip out on work because of a little stress either," Jack returns with equal grittiness.

Was *that* how Alana worded it? Will stalks closer and leans over the desk so that he can get close to Jack, get close enough to make him nervous. He doesn't look into his eyes, though. Jack is a man hounded by memories he can't escape, and they're so far into the front of his mind that Will finds himself falling into the same one every time he looks at him. It's Jack's only defense against empaths, and it's a damn good one.

What he can see, though, is the conversations that must have occurred in this very room without him, mentions of his psyche and his behaviors. Kade Purnell sitting with a sharp pencil skirt and a well-fitted blazer on one side of the desk, calmly putting Jack in his place as she denies him his request.

When Will thinks that, though, he stops. He looks along the desk, inhales a certain sort of dreadful comradery. He can imagine the relief, the ability to place the blame off of himself and onto someone else. A sort of relief that smells like cough medicine and stale trail mix, and Will glides his gloved hands along the surface of the desk –if anything, to remind Jack that all he has to do to take off his gloves to feel the truth in the whorls and curves of the wood.

No, Will may not want to look in his eyes to read his thoughts, but he can dream up the realities that happened when he wasn't in the room. His gifts give him that.

"I'll keep looking for him," he says at last, and his eyes fasten to Jack's hands sitting curled to fists at his desk. "I'll do my job, even if you're inclined to hobble me to do it."

“Thank you,” Jack says, not sounding at all thankful. “That’s all we ask you to do here, Will.”

“Abigail Hobbs is innocent, too,” he tosses in, heading towards the door. “I’m sure Dr. Bloom told you, but as your certified lie detector test, I can promise you the same. Traumatized, scared, and indignant that we’d even ask, but honest.”

And maybe it’s because he knows Jack is lying to him, but he doesn’t feel all that guilty about lying in return. Whatever Agent Dolarhyde was investigating before he snapped, it must have been serious –enough for Kade Purnell to e-mail Will to shut him up. Enough for Jack Crawford to lie to him. Enough for Dolarhyde to lose some part of himself while looking in the mirrors stuck to the eyes of another.

Will would keep Abigail safe. He’d keep himself safe. He’d find another way to find Francis Dolarhyde, too.

-

As he’s walking to his car to go and see Reba McClane, something in the air sets him off. He isn’t sure if it’s the smell on the wind, or if it’s the way the back of his shirt presses too tight to his skin, but he pauses by his car door, tensing. There are many things about an empath that biologically are used to connect to people, this he knows. It has been his struggle since he was able to recall the way his father’s simple hug made his skin feel as though it were ripping in two.

There are other things, though, things still being studied within labs and universities, among talk show hosts and scientists about empaths. As much as they struggle to connect, to broach that space between them and another, there is another aspect to their abilities, something that grants them an immense sense of *knowing* things that no one else could possibly know, things that make it impossible to connect because who wants to spend their time around a person that knows about any number of unknowable things?

For example, things like the feeling of being watched.

He looks about himself discreetly, but nothing immediately stands out. His keys fumble with the lock, and he slowly opens his car door, swallowing so hard it almost hurts, his heartbeat stuttering before beginning again. He’d heard neurotypicals call it paranoia, the way the hair on the back of their neck would stand up. He’d also read contradictory accounts from survivors of serial killers whose ‘paranoia’ saved their life when it came down to brass tacks.

Being an E-3 empath, he was privy to enough tangible emotion floating along the breeze to know that it wasn’t paranoia. He was most certainly being watched.

It wasn’t by another empath, though. If it was, he wouldn’t necessarily be able to sense it. Empaths trained to observe and investigate knew how to dampen their person, soften their existence within the world so that another empath couldn’t see. Much like Abigail Hobbs could draw barriers that held even Will back, any other trained empath could do something similar.

A neurotypical, then.

As he drives away, he thinks of Dolarhyde's words to Reba, shared within the walls of the place he most liked to work, out of the gaze of the FBI:

Is there someone like me watching someone like me?

-

Unable to shake the feeling of being watched, he doesn't go to Reba. He respects her desire for the FBI to be unaware of her relationship, and he doesn't want eyes where they don't belong. Instead, he finds himself sitting outside of the coffee shop he went to with Dr. Lecter, and he peruses the articles he's posted once more, a decimated bagel in one hand and Beverly's tablet in the other.

Evolution of Social Exclusion through Empaths.

Hannibal Lecter talks about empaths a lot for someone that isn't an empath. He speaks as though they are their own species of person, all the while with the tone of someone that views them as equals in every way. As Will rereads his latest work in the journals, he picks at the bagel rather than eats it, and it's only when his phone rings that he's startled from such prolific words.

"Graham."

"Agent Graham, it's Dr. Lecter. I hope I'm not bothering you."

He wasn't. Will wonders at that, that he shouldn't be bothered by an unprompted phone call, and he sets the tablet down to better focus. He keeps the article up, though.

"I'm taking a long lunch," he says. "Isn't that what was recommended?"

"A long and early lunch, yes," Lecter agrees. "Far be it from me to disturb a healthy eating habit, but when you left yesterday, you forgot your glasses at the hospital. I thought to return them to you."

Will notices that he doesn't mention the how and the method in which he left, and he's eternally grateful for that. He's not sure if he wants to discuss it –is it safe to tell Lecter about Abigail? Fingertips hover over the top of the article, tapping the screen so it doesn't go black.

"Thank you."

"Do you have a free moment today?"

His phone buzzes with a message from Beverly, and he glances at the notification before setting the phone back beside his ear. "I should. Dr. Lecter, in your article regarding the social exclusion of empaths, you mention a forced distance made unconsciously by both empaths and neurotypicals."

“You’ve read my work?” He sounds pleased, although Will can’t be entirely sure. His voice is always mildly pleasant in some manner.

“Yes.” A beat. “Some,” he amends. *All.*

“Early theories supposed empaths first broached that line diving one person from another due to a need to connect. It evolved into the gifts we see today, but first it was a connection.”

“That connection was ultimately rejected by society, though.”

“Mankind, as the apex predator, doesn’t enjoy feeling that there are some among them that are far more gifted,” Hannibal agrees. Will throws away the destroyed remains of his bagel and tucks the tablet under his arm, heading back to his car. If Beverly is texting him, he’s needed somewhere.

“And in response, out of fear of that persecution, empaths created invisible barriers between themselves and everyone else, despite the initial needs for connection that supposedly gave them their gifts in the first place,” Will adds on.

“An ironic reaction, but yes.” There is a pause as he seems to try gathering his thoughts around Will’s questions. “Should I ask about yesterday?”

“Should you?”

“I’d like to.”

Silence once more. Will chews on the inside of his mouth and climbs into the car, shutting the door behind himself. On impulse, he locks it because despite removing himself from an uncomfortable scene, he most certainly still feels like he’s being watched. Just down the row, an SUV is parked under some shade, and he puts on sunglasses so that he can scrutinize it subtly.

“I was unprepared,” he says at last. An understatement. “I didn’t handle it very well.”

Another text buzzes against his ear, and he glances to it. When another one comes in, he puts Lecter on speakerphone so that he can read them, idly buckling his seatbelt.

“What happened?”

Where are you?

We need you back here in thirty.

We got a call in Louisiana. It’s Dolarhyde.

“Dr. Lecter, I’m going to have to call you back,” Will says distractedly, and he starts the car. His skin hums from the last message, comes to life at the way the text curls around the RA’s name. It’s Dolarhyde. It’s Dolarhyde.

“Is everything alright?”

“Dolarhyde –the RA –is in Lousinana. I’ve got to go.”

“I can return your glasses at another time, then,” he says lightly, and Will nods distractedly, taking him off speakerphone so that he has both hands on the wheel as he peels out of the parking lot.

“If you can be at HQ soon, I can get them there,” he says, and as he turns away from the coffee shop, he glances in the rearview mirror in time to see the SUV also pull away and head in his direction.

“I can do that, Agent Graham.”

“Bye.” As an afterthought, he tosses in, “Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Lecter replies.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for all of the support and love this has gotten! You have no idea how much this means :)

A special thanks to Emily Elm, Matilda, Inky_starlight, Andrea, and duhaunt6 --you're the best! <3

When Words Smart and Pop

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8:

In the rush of packing, debriefing, and organizing, Hannibal Lecter shows up with Will's glasses.

"Is it bad?" he asks lightly as Will throws a few things together. He always has a duffel bag in his car that gets refreshed every so often for unplanned trips.

"A young married couple," he says. At the presentation of his glasses, he gratefully slides them on so that he can focus on the rim of them rather than sneak glances to Lecter out of the corner of his eye. Despite the energy in the air of the EBAU, the doctor is utterly calm, placid in the wake of emotion that runs high and makes Will's skin tingle. He was careful to ensure no ounce of his skin from the neck down is visible. He doesn't want to accidentally touch.

"No children?"

"Not this time," Will says, and he pauses thoughtfully. "He's changed his MO."

"Have you been to Louisiana before?"

He has, but the memories are hazy. A father whose shoulders were tan under the sun, muscles bulging as he fought with the motor of a boat engine in the swamplands. The water was green under the sunlight, and the air smelled like bugs and algae. "A long time ago," he says, far long after it's entirely appropriate to reply. He tosses his toothbrush on top and zips the duffel bag shut, turning towards Dr. Lecter with an awkward shift in his step.

"Most of your memories outside of the FBI must circulate entirely around the Empath Academy," Hannibal realizes.

"They do."

"Do you have someone to feed your dogs?" he asks, and Will's taken aback by the question. It's no secret he has dogs –the dog hair along the bottom of his slacks alone would be enough to point that fact out to someone looking for it –but the question is sudden, abrupt in the buzzing air that says he has to go, he has to go because Dolarhyde struck again and Will Graham needs to see the crime scene fresh.

"Dr. Bloom normally feeds them," he says slowly.

"Dr. Bloom is in Chicago co-lecturing at a university," Hannibal replies. He doesn't point out the odd relationship that Will has with the EBAU's psychiatrist, that she'd feed his dogs for him. "I can do it, if you'd like."

Dr. Lecter would feed his dogs, if he liked. Will wants to say yes, yes please, that'd be such a relief because he doesn't have many people that he can ask to feed his dogs, but he's not so sure if that's a good idea, letting him into his house so that he can see just how Will Graham lives away from society.

Then again, if Will is back in time, he can maybe graze his hands over whatever Lecter touched so that he can learn more –*understand* more. Without his gloves, maybe he'd gain an impression of the mind behind the impenetrable façade?

"…I don't know if that'd be professional," he says, and he forces himself sound regretful saying it. "If you're my psychiatrist, and I'm working…" He busies himself with zipping up the duffle bag rather than look to Lecter.

"Far be it from me to cross a professional barrier, but I am offering. You're not asking."

"It'd be a personal favor, though."

"God forbid we become too friendly because I fed your dogs," Hannibal says with a smile.

Despite the stress of all that's happened, Will stops long enough to smile back.

"I don't have many people to feed my dogs," he admits. It's probably obvious, since he uses an FBI psychiatrist to feed his dogs, but he says it anyway. An admission without feeling entirely too vulnerable.

Better that than admit to the good doctor that he's intentionally harboring a Seer right beneath their noses.

"I would encourage you to take the steps that would make lasting friendships outside of work, but we can discuss that another time, when you're not busy." Lecter passes by Will's desk, pauses at Beverly's tablet that sets open.

Right on Lecter's articles. Every damn tab of them. Twenty-fucking-tabs of them.

And because, as Will has come to learn in his lifetime, the world is hell-bent on giving him a genuine 'fuck you' with a middle finger, Lecter naturally glances down and sees.

Will tenses, tastes his own embarrassment in the air at the evidence that shows that he may have more interest in Lecter than he's willing to show. Without the ability to *see*, he's left with Lecter's body language to tell him what he's thinking, and that in of itself is a terrifying thing at a time like this. He notes his stance, the curious turn of his shoulders, and the purse of lips as he reads one of the lines –Will wonders if he looks long enough to see *just* how many tabs are open.

When he finally looks up, he spares Will a kind smile.

“I confess that I often feel self-conscious, reading my own work,” he says, and there is no amusement or judgement in his tone.

“That’s…” Will has no words. His gifts extend to the mental, not the social. A thousand excuses crowd his mind, each one more ridiculous than the last, and he fumbles with his duffle bag before he ultimately drops it on the chair beside him, hands useless at his sides.

“It’s humbling and relieving to see you have an interest in it. I don’t suppose you are the sort to waste your time with inane writings about ‘overcoming’ and ‘thinking positively’.”

“You said, ‘mind over matter is only as powerful as the singular mind,’” he says hollowly. “’When a mind, however, is plagued by the many entities surrounding it due to its nature of connection, it is not so much a mind overcoming matter as it is a mind attempting to stop *becoming* the matter.’”

“I did.”

“So,” he continues, uncomfortable, “I agreed with that.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal says pleasantly. “Truly, I respect your opinion on such matters, since they’re experiences you’ve endured. If I’m ever off base on any future writings, please tell me.”

He sounds like he means it. The sort of feelings that stem from the realization that Lecter doesn’t find his interest anything to laugh at stay with him, long after he sees Lecter out of HQ and long after he is on a plane to Louisiana, crammed between a Zeller that snores and a Beverly that was smart enough to use the window as the prop for her pillow rather than use Will’s shoulder.

He thumbs through the many tabs on Beverly’s tablet –he wonders when she’ll finally tire of loaning it out to him –and he wonders at Lecter’s understanding, the sort of person that is perfectly able of seeing without the world-wearying pressure of having to be seen.

-

Dolarhyde is no such person. In seeing, he is most certainly seen.

Can you see me?

As I hunt, lurk, dip through the azaleas and rest among the lavender, do you sense that I am near? You who water your garden and tend to it as a master of your world, do you not sense when the hunter draws near to you, when the hunter can smell you?

Will hunches down among the azaleas and inhales the heavy, drooping scent of them. Fall in Louisiana means that it is cold in the morning and unbearably hot by the afternoon, and sweat drips down the back of his neck to cling to his shirt. He passes ungloved hands

along the dirt and inhales Dolarhyde's calculated steps. It tastes like betrayal and fury. It feels like heavy secrets and fear.

When I strike, it is not to kill. To kill is to end, quick sounds that stop because something made them stop; I do not stop, but I Change, I Become. Hands that grasp around your neck, and you beg that I spare our wife? That I would hurt our wife, the love of my life whose flowers adorn our dinner table, whose hands pass along my heartbeat to feel the fear beneath?

Just what have We Become? Just what have you done?

Will stops at the edge of the garden and stares down at the body of a Mr. Hawthorne, the strangulations marks on his neck purpled and hideous. His eyes are bloodshot, his mouth is slack, and Will has the rippling sensation of what it's like to strangle someone, hands taut and unforgiving against the neck of someone that has betrayed him, someone that has turned on him when it was his *job* to help him.

"Will?" Jack prompts lightly.

Will jerks from his reverie and looks about, hands flexing at his sides. They're sore, and he wonders just when he'll have the time to work on his forearm muscle exercises. A quick trip to Wal-Mart should get him the equipment, a simple enough contraption, and –

-No, no. He's not going to purchase anything. He's not trying to strangle *anyone*.

"…This man has betrayed him," he says slowly. He says 'him', to better avoid saying 'me'. He tastes it, though, the honest and stark betrayal of the man with whom he placed his trust. "He trusted him to do something, and it wasn't done."

"What did he trust him with?"

"Not clear," Will murmurs, and he folds his arms tightly across his chest. His palm presses to the material, and he feels Beverly's fatigue as she brushed past him at the airport to grab her bag. She hated flying. "Whatever it was, he's also saddened by this. Angry, but… also saddened."

"Has he already moved on from the area?"

"No. He's not *here*, but he's on the hunt. He's not…finished."

No, no, there was still so much to *do*, so much to *Become*.

"Dr. Hawthorne is a psychiatric consultant for the FBI," Beverly says, off to the side. She holds a file and jots a few notes down, hair teasing the sides of her face and leaping about in the muggy, humid wind. "He was in DC a few months ago working on a couple of projects before returning here."

Jack twitches at that, as though he's been jolted by a quick and sudden shock of electricity. "Maybe he consulted about the RA?"

It's his tone, Will decides much later, that makes him do what he does next. His gloves still tucked into his back pocket, Will sidles around Jack and passes a hand along his suitcoat, somehow still on despite the humid southern air that makes patches of sweat collect just underneath Will's shirt. As he does, he has to swallow back a muted noise at the impressions, the truths that ring through his mind with sharp, startling clarity.

"It's not cause for concern."

"Director Purnell, I've got Graham tracking this guy, and you don't think we should maybe send a small detail to Hawthorne and Slowinski? He got Perkins over the issue of sugar pills; what makes you think he won't go after the psychiatrist that told him that everything was going to be alright?"

"You send out a detail, it draws attention. We're not trying to draw attention, Jack."

It's quick, like the fluttering of pages under an air vent that suddenly kicked on. He's tucking his hands into his gloves before Jack can suspect, before anything can be said that would potentially imply that he was abusing his gifts. He can still feel Dr. Hawthorne's skin particles under his nails; he'll need to wash his hands.

"Graham?"

He looks back at Jack, poised in the doorway to the house –Dr. Hawthorne's house. Dolarhyde's house. Will's house.

"I…I should go and see m-the wife. Hawthorne's wife." He shifts from foot to foot and looks about the backyard, scanning the fence as well as the weeping willows just beyond it. "Dolarhyde is falling in on new identities; he thought of her as his wife as he killed Dr. Hawthorne."

"Complete dissociation?"

"I'd say so."

Jack grunts and watches Beverly make a few notes, circling the corpse. "Take your time, Will."

"I will," he promises, and he heads into the house to see what's become of his wife.

-

He isn't part of the door-to-door questioning or security sweeps because it's an exhausting affair for an empath and Jack doesn't want to tire him so quickly. Instead, he waits by the FBI vehicles, loitering underneath the mildly cool embrace of a Weeping Willow whose branches dip down around him and cry sap to the grass below. He can feel it, though, as sure of this as he is about the beautiful light that often caught in Mrs. Hawthorne's hair when the sun struck it, as sure as he is that the mirrors he placed over her eyes finally allowed him to see, and in seeing was seen:

Dolarhyde is still in the area. Of that he is certain, and of that he is sure.

He sits down at the base of the trunk and closes his eyes, rubbing his thumbs against the sides of his index fingers in an effort to ground himself. He'd washed his hands, but he still felt the skin of Dr. Hawthorne on his fingerprints. Dolarhyde was a lucky man to only be a Seer and Dreamer –if he'd been a Feeler, killing him like that would have likely killed Dolarhyde, too.

You are one of many, many that I seek, many that I will Change because in Changing them, it furthers my own growth, my own Becoming.

Will stares out between the spaces of the branches and thinks of his father, of trees that leaned with the heat and grew up only to grow out and down with heavy branches that brushed the ground. Black gum trees whose bark dug into his skin when he touched them, Red Maples that stood so proud. Even young, he'd known they were poor. Even young, he knew there was something wrong with him.

How else could he explain to his father that he could feel the tree *breathing*?

His wife once sat beneath this tree and read. He can Dream her steps picking their way around the already fallen leaves, same as he can see her tuck her legs beneath her as she settled on her jean jacket and engrossed herself within the pages of a fantasy.

Will's never read a fantasy story because there has always been that hesitation that he'll be pulled so far into it that he wouldn't be able to find his way out.

Instead, as he waits for Jack to exhaust himself with a door-to-door that won't yield him Dolarhyde's whereabouts, Will amuses himself with reading Lecter's articles again. He thinks of Lecter thanking him, his seemingly genuine embarrassment at seeing his own works, and despite having had to feel the grief of murdering his own wife, Will finds it in himself to smile.

-

He watches the news at the hotel room to try and distract himself. He idly peruses Lecter's articles, and he wonders how the dogs are –they're the friendly sort that would happily welcome someone as gentle-spirited as Lecter is. He already misses Winston's head on his lap, eyes closed in bliss as he rubs a particularly hard to reach spot on his ear.

Maybe if he was with Winston, he wouldn't instead still feel the grit of Dr. Hawthorne's skin under his nails.

Dolarhyde doesn't see it as killing; he sees death as a means of change. He changes them, and in changing he too is changed, aided in Becoming something –Will senses the Becoming much like donning an old, familiar coat. It is not a new thing that Dolarhyde wishes to Be, but something that has always been, something that he merely wishes to grow. To develop.

Betrayal is the taste of Jack on his tongue. Despite Beverly being two doors down, he doesn't go to her room and ask her to drink with him.

When the news grows to be too much, he turns it off and paces the hotel floor, unable to take his shoes off because hotels are a certain sort of death trap for an empath, the air itself cloaked in the sensations of the living to the point that it tastes like stale, dead skin cells. Body odor. Impatience and desperation. He pauses and stares down at the file he should be looking through, trying to compare and contrast evidence until he can find just what he's looking for.

In reality, he'd find the truth faster if he went and slapped his hands over Jack's ears and really, truly dug deep.

He can't risk a situation like that, though; if he fell in too far, if Jack's emotions pulled him past the point of his walls and his sense of self, Will can't be too sure if he'd be able to find his way back. The truth, with all of its capabilities, would probably be just enough to undo him.

He goes down the hall to get ice for the whiskey. His gloves are tugged taut against his skin, and he shovels ice into the bucket with quick, jerking motions. *Skroosh*. Jack lied to him again. *Th-thump*. *Krshsh.* Jack was lying to Beverly, too. *Skroosh*. Jack could confirm that Dr. Hawthorne had worked with Dolarhyde but refused to say it. *Th-thump*. Sugar pills, a doctor that wielded Dolarhyde's –the RA, he tells himself –trust like a lumpy rock, and Jack working directly with Kade Purnell. *Skroosh.* Will isn't so sure that this is a matter of an RA so much as it's a matter of the FBI maybe making a sore mistake. *Th-thump. Krshsh*. The RA may have happened because Dolarhyde already had a tentative grasp on reality, but something about the FBI in particular spooked him. Betrayed him. Tried to Change him.

He closes the lid to the ice machine and heads back to the room, walking in and closing the door behind himself.

He's then grabbed from behind, a rag pressed tight to his nose and mouth; in his shock, he sucks in a deep breath and tastes something sweet, an odd scent of gasoline in the air. He lungs scream, shout *no, no, no,* but it's there, it's in his breath and it's *wrong.* Against his cheek, the rag feels like terror and purpose and Dolarhyde's madness seeps in.

He's dragged under a river of bubbles into a dizzying, lurching rest.

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He comes to on his hotel bed, and he sits up with a dizzying lurch that makes the room sway and spin. His stomach threatens upheaval, but he holds it down and concentrates on his breathing; short, curt gasps as he tries to figure out just what happened.

Across from him, Dolarhyde sits still as the grave.

He is big; bigger than Will expected, bigger than he could certainly take down in a solid fight. Against a plain black t-shirt, his muscles are taut and capable, and he sits with the edge of someone prepared to strike at any moment. He stares at Will impassively, the faint scarring on his lip hitching it as he observes Will.

“The rag may have overwhelmed you,” he says in the tense, taut silence. “I tried not to touch it too much.”

“Chloroform only lasts a few minutes,” Will says. It’s slurred, and the words tumble about in his mouth before he can quite articulate them.

“You were out for two,” Dolarhyde agrees.

“…I’d better not have liver damage,” Will warns him. Despite the situation, he does care about his liver.

“If you do, it’s from the drinking and not from me.”

That’s a fair assessment, and Will nods along with it.

“I knew you were around. I thought you were…looking for his family. Dr. Hawthorne’s.”

Dolarhyde tilts his head, and it’s not entirely human. Will knows that if he could just look up to his eyes, pretty as Beverly had called them, he could see what his next step is, maybe be a bit preemptive about it –if he looks, though, Dolarhyde will look, too. He’s an E-2, and one just scared enough to weaponize it like Abigail did.

God, he can’t have him do what Abigail did. He’ll be too many people, too many people with too many fears. One can only have so many fears before they eat them alive, completely destroy them.

“…Do you remember me from the academy?” he asks quietly. He speaks with a slow, stilted gait, like he’s afraid of saying the wrong thing.

“I don’t remember many people from the academy.”

“I can see that. There was a barrier around you.” He shifts ever-so-slightly in the large, bulky chair and frowns. “Everyone could see the barrier you made. Thick walls and a s-scared boy within.”

“You dreamed up my walls?”

“It didn’t take much. You helped me see them, thick walls around a scared but purposeful boy.”

“Where are your walls now, Agent Dolarhyde?” Will asks softly. “Do I need to help you Dream them?”

His eyes flash with something, a dark and wicked sort of hunger, then it’s gone. “I think you would, if I asked you to. You’d sacrifice your own mind to touch your skin to mine and help me Dream walls between me and the world.”

“That’s my job,” Will says. “I help empaths.”

“You *hunt* empaths, Agent Graham,” Francis corrects. “I watched them, and you hunted them.”

In truth, Francis Dolarhyde’s words make more sense than Will’s did. Every time he tried to help, he only made it worse. Every time he tried to find some semblance of goodness to come from his actions, that goodness took their skin and pressed it so tight to his that they became one. He hunts empaths, only Francis decided that he would hunt Will instead.

“You didn’t come to kill me,” Will says slowly. “You…felt terrified.”

“I don’t want to kill you, Agent Graham. You’re as much a victim as every other empath.”

“I’m not a victim,” Will disagrees. Victim means that he doesn’t have a choice in the matter, and Will likes to believe that he’s chosen his path.

“Who watches the watcher, Agent Graham? Who hunts the hunter?”

Will thinks of the feeling he’d had when leaving HQ so angrily, that sensation that someone was watching him, eyes on the back of his neck.

“…I met Reba,” he confesses. He notes Dolarhyde tensing, corded muscles bunching. “I told her that I want to help you, Agent Dolarhyde. She said that you were losing time.”

“We’re all losing time,” he fires back. “The longer you are in the clutches of those people, you’ll lose time, too.”

“Were you experiencing blackouts? Were you looking at the watch and realizing hours had passed without you?”

Dolarhyde stands, and the gun is still trained on Will with calm assurance that he could pull the trigger at any moment.

“Why did you kill *our* wife?” Will asks, agonized.

“She was my wife, too,” Francis replies, aggrieved. “But I had to Change her.”

“Francis-” Will presses, although he remains on the bed. He’s many things, but he’s not stupid.

“Do you want to know who I was investigating before I decided that the FBI no longer had my best interests at heart, Agent Graham?” Francis Dolarhyde asks.

That takes Will aback, and he can only nod helplessly. No one at the Bureau will tell him, and he finds a dark sort of humor in the fact that out of everyone in the world, the RA he’s hunting is the one that’s willing to tell him, to give him the answers that he so desperately needs.

Francis is at the door, sliding on a black jacket so that he can pull the hood of it up over his face. The shadows of it create devilish hollows on his cheeks, makes his scar look

more like a snarl.

"*You*, Agent Graham. Kade Purnell had me investigating *you*." He pauses, more than likely to savor the sucker-punch expression on Will's face. "Good night, Agent Graham. Be careful with your walls. I see cracks in them."

He's out of the door before Will can say another word.

Although every aspect of his training demands that he go after him –at least *call* Katz or Jack down the hall –he doesn't. He sits there on the bed, gloved hands pressed to the dirty comforter, and he takes deep, full inhales of the stale and putrid air.

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The next morning, after a night of sleeplessness and tossing and turning on a bed that held too many memories, he stands beside the other agents, part of their circle but not *part* of their circle, and he doesn't say a single word about Dolarhyde.

He's not sure that he could, even if he wanted to.

Was there someone like him watching someone like him?

Yes. Yes there was.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the day late in posting! I was traveling for the weekend because my niece turned four this last Friday! She says hello, thank you for letting me come to her party, and she hopes you enjoy this chapter!

She's a pretty cute kid tbh.

I was so excited to introduce Dolarhyde into this chapter tbh, I've been waiting as patiently as I could for it because I adore him/his arc in this!

Check out my Tumblr for exciting new updates! :)

A special thanks to EmilyElm, Matilda, Inky_Starlight, Superlurk, and Duhaunt6! You guys are the best <3

What Walls do Crumble

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9:

He reads Blake on the plane back, fingers bare against the pages. He waits until Beverly has fallen asleep beside him, tucked up against Zeller, and he hunches over so that they can't see him remove his gloves, an honest trepidation to his actions like it's some form of voyeurism.

The pages are smooth, the edges thinned from careful hands turning them over the years, and as he flips through the book, he tastes an honest sense of hunger, something genuine and poignant with want. Dr. Lecter devoured the words within, and he pauses on a space where the oils of his fingertips discolored the page ever-so-slightly.

"I was angry with my friend;

I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

I was angry with my foe:

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,

Night & morning with my tears:

And I sunned it with smiles,

And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.

Till it bore an apple bright.

And my foe beheld it shine,

And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,

When the night had veild the pole;

In the morning glad I see;

My foe outstretched beneath the tree."

He thinks of Dolarhyde, carving a path of blood through those that betrayed him, and he thinks of Lecter who apparently feels much the same. No rest for those that hate, for those that want.

No rest for those that watch, and in doing so are watched.

He rereads it and strokes the pages reverently, like he can somehow ingrain the essence of such poised delight, such honest and stark emotion. It's the first hint of Hannibal Lecter that he can taste with his empathy, and he licks his lips to better savor it.

If Dolarhyde was watching Will and found something out that made him question his actions, there had to be some form of trail on it. Whether it be e-mails, files, or some sort of reference, there would be something that could piece together just what he'd found. Had he been set on Will, only to find there was nothing there to see? Had he investigated him, only to find there *was* something to find, and it scared him enough that his walls came down? Perhaps there was nothing, yet he was informed that he was to watch until he could find something?

Perhaps -although Will doubts this with so much emotion that it makes his hands tremble -Dolarhyde was already losing his grasp on reality, and his fears and observations of the FBI were based on nothing more than the troubled mind of a Rogue E-2.

If he entertains that notion, though, then he entertains the idea that his being investigated by the FBI was somehow justified; if Will acknowledges that, then he has to acknowledge that there is something fundamentally wrong with him, something that the FBI saw early enough that they wanted to get the grab on it before it slipped from the cracks in his walls that Dolarhyde so easily saw.

If he acknowledges that, then he acknowledges that Lecter of all people was wrong to give him a stamp of approval. He passes his hands over the cover of the book and shakes his head, disquieted by the thought. He respects Lecter's observations, his quick and careful thought processes. If Lecter is wrong about him, what else is he wrong about?

With his six month review coming up, that sort of thought is a terrifying one indeed.

-

He works late at the HQ, late enough that Jack has gone home and Katz has called him a workaholic over her shoulder as she left. A few guards roam the halls, but still Will works, pouring over the files that he's allowed to see of Dolarhyde, his past investigations and observations of everyone in the EBAU except Will.

He works until even the guard on his hall leaves to go and take a break, and that is when he moves.

Jack Crawford's office is just down the hall, after all.

The office is unlocked, and he lets himself in with only the mildest sense of guilt. He reminds himself that Jack lied to him, that the links and ties to Dolarhyde and his victims are substantial enough that he may have 'just' cause in his actions; by withholding that information, he not only blinds Will but does Dolarhyde an injustice, a man that held a gun to Will, and rather than pull the trigger, said that he was a victim, too.

His computer is password protected, but that doesn't stop an empath. Will removes his gloves and lowers his crumbling walls with care, hands ghosting and gliding along the keys to find the right memory. He feels e-mails, impatience, worry, fear, and a stab of guilt so poignant it tastes like dust from discarded stone.

When he feels the secrecy and quickness of a habitual string of letters, he mimics them and he is in.

It takes only a few minutes to find the files he's looking for. Jack had lied before, when he claimed to not have access. First, Will prints his own files, things he's not necessarily supposed to see but things he feels the need to know, things that have gnawed at him since Dolarhyde told him that he'd been under investigation for a time. He gathers those into a basic brown folder, then pulls up Dolarhyde's files and prints those, too. He figures he's got about ten minutes total before another guard does their rounds, and he doesn't want to be caught in such a compromising place.

On a hunch, he prints Hobbs' files as well, then logs out, gloves snug on his hands as he sees himself out of Jack's office, then out of the HQ.

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"Will, get some rest."

"I'm fine." Will looked up from his paperwork, frowning at Jack Crawford poised in his doorway.

"You've been here for days. Have you even been home to your dogs?"

He hadn't, but that wasn't the issue. "He's not killing them, Jack. He's honoring them."

"What?"

"He put her back because the meat was bad," Will continued, and he walked over to the cork board where the pictures of the girls haunted his sleep, haunted his dreams because he knew them so intimately that he could almost taste them. "Elise. So he's eating them, honoring them, because in this, he…he is protecting his daughter. Honoring her in their place."

"…You think?" Jack wandered over to look at the photos, hands planted on his hips.

"I listened to the recording of his evaluation, and really, that's what this is," Will replied, near-reverent. He thinks of the six month review, the questions that made Hobbs uncomfortable, the thoughts that made him go quiet for long periods of time on the recording. "He loves his daughters, worries about her going to college, wants what's best and thinks of her often enough that he's slipping up at work.

"So they say, 'Agent Hobbs, it's natural for you to fear her going away. All fathers fear this.' And this is the part that I think did it, the part that gave him his low score. He says to them, he says, 'I've dreamed her life a thousand ways and a thousand times, and in each and every one we aren't separated like this. I can't do this alone; I can't do this without her.'"

"He has a fixation with his daughter," said Jack with a severe frown. "These girls are all emulations of her?"

"Yes, yes," Will affirmed, staring at one. "He's consuming them, taking them in such a way that he can live without her because he has some aspect of her, some essence that will always remain because if there's one thing a Dreamer has, it's their dreams…" He sighed quietly, feeling that statement so deep it burrowed beneath his marrow. "They'll always have their dreams."

"And how are your dreams, Will?" Jack wondered, just quiet enough to sting.

That is when Will remembered himself, remembered that as an E-3 he can't talk like that, say things that make a neurotypical nervous because they have the power to utterly obliterate him if he's not careful, if he lets them take his daughter who only just-

-No, no; not his daughter. He's not Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

"…I dream of a vacation when this is over," he said at last, calm and cool and utterly dishonest. "Camping up in the mountains."

He wasn't entirely sure if Jack believed him; he regarded Will with a sort of expression bordering on suspicion as he scratched the side of his neck and shifted. Will went back to his paperwork, circling the desk to sit down.

"Katz tells me you haven't left HQ in days," he said.

"I've been working hard, Jack."

"She said when she asked if you wanted to grab a bite of food, you didn't seem to hear her," Jack pressed.

Will grunted in affirmation because it occured to him that he wasn't even aware that Beverly stopped by to pay him a visit.

"I know I've been pushing you on this one, Will, but-"

“You’ve been on my ass to grab this guy, Jack, and I’m going to get him,” Will cut in, looking up from the file. “You said to me, ‘we gotta do this one quick, Will, I need you to get in his head and really rope him up quick.”

“Not so far in his head you’re not sure where your own is, thoug,” Jack interjected. “Where’s your head, Will?”

“My head is at the Hobbs’ house,” Will retorted sharply. “Where I think that if we really want a shot at getting the RA, Jack, we go through his daughter. You want Hobbs, you get his daughter to lead us to him.”

Then two days later, they made their way to the Hobbs house and the horrors within.

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Will goes to see Abigail in the early morning because enough hours have passed with him tossing and turning in his bed that he can’t sleep. The folders burn a hole in his bag, but he can’t quite bring himself to read them just yet. He has a need, but there is inside of him such a resistance, every inch of him screaming that to open those files, he is not only committing career-suicide but he’s also endangering what little freedom he has.

“I owe you a walk,” he says to her as she puts on a supple, snug leather jacket. She spares him a glance, eyes fixed to the side of his cheek before she turns away to fiddle with the laces on her boots.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she says curtly.

He supposes she’s right seeing as how she’s the reason he feels certain corners of his own mind crumbling into something insubstantial, but he still escorts her out to the small walkway that leads to a simple, plain garden area. She leans on him, and every aspect of her near him is covered and clothed, a blessed barrier. He wonders if she’ll grab him again if he gets too emotional.

“…You haven’t told on me,” she says as she sits down. She tries to sound dismissive, but there is a thread of worry.

“I wouldn’t do that to us,” Will replies. He watches her shoe swing in aimless circles, toe dragging through the dirt.

“There’s no us,” she replies, but she peeks up to his face as she says it, guilty because she knows what she did, she KNOWS the ramifications of her actions even as she did them.

“There is,” he returns calmly. “You flooded my senses, Abigail. It was a conscious, driven act on your part. Whether you wanted it or not, though, you looked into my eyes and saw aspects of me, too.”

She doesn’t answer for a few minutes, and he sits down, just far enough that if she tries to take him by surprise again, she can’t. He’s patient. He has more than enough time before he has to be anywhere, and he’s got three files in his bag that would spell the end of

his career if he's caught with them. Perhaps his actions are a form of stalling, but he isn't quite sure.

"…You're so alone," she says at last, and those words sear him, brand him and leave him shifting farther away from her. "That's what I saw. I saw…you in a room filled with people, and you are utterly alone. I had my father, I had my mother…who do you have, Agent Graham?"

Will thinks of that, a hollow ache in his chest. He has an FBI psychiatrist that watches his dogs sometimes, when she's not busy. He has a boss that is keeping secrets, and he has an FBI-hired psychiatrist that writes about empaths as though he were one. He has an RA that risked his head start in his race from the FBI in order to warn Will, and he has the sensation of what it felt like to have his neck torn open. He stares at the ground, small shoots of grass that stretched and tore concrete in order to rise to the sky. Nature finds a way.

He has Eldon Stammets in his dreams sometimes, who was so desperate to connect that he buried innocent people alive.

"…Your father used you to murder innocent women," he says hollowly. "Did you really have him?"

"If what I saw of you is what the FBI does to empaths, I'm fine with the price that I paid," she returns. "I…think of those girls, and I hate myself for it, but based off of what they've done to you, I'd say I turned out alright."

He doesn't have a strong argument for that. Instead of going down that road, he instead asks, "How did he teach you to weaponize your gifts?"

Abigail regards him heavily, suspiciously.

"I…am in a position where knowing that may very well be what saves my life," he explains. God, is it really so bleak? Is he really in such dire straits?

He thinks of what will happen if they find out that he took those files, and he suppresses a shudder. He's not in a position to leave any stone unturned.

"Who is trying to kill you?" she asks.

"I don't know yet," Will replies.

Rather than accuse him of being paranoid, Abigail takes his question with the same severity that he needs her to. She looks about, then scoots closer to him and leans in, to better whisper.

"It's…not how you make it sound," she reveals. "It's more like…I see your fears and weaknesses, and I can use them against you."

"How?" he asks, voice pitching low to match hers. "How do you see it and stop yourself from being consumed by it?"

She gives him an odd look, a twisted expression between pity and pain. From anyone else, it would have made him angry to see such an expression and know that it was leveled at him. After Dolarhyde, though, Will figures he can understand why there'd be such a face made at him.

Was he really so twisted up with the FBI? Did they truly hold him on so short a leash?

"You…build walls, Agent Graham," she says carefully. Gently. "And your walls are so strong that you can see by looking through the windows rather than falling in."

"Did you see my walls?" he wonders.

"They have cracks in them," she whispers. "Cracks like glass, splintering. I found you so easily because your walls are beginning to break."

She's not wrong; Dolarhyde saw it that way, too.

"Do you know how to fix it?"

"Don't they teach you that at the FBI?" she asks snidely.

He looks out to the leaves that spiral from branches, caught in the wild breeze that blows just overhead. It's chilly, and he buttons the top button on his coat. He knows the words to say; it'd feel like he was lying to himself to say them, though.

"…My six month evaluation is coming up, Abigail Hobbs," he says instead. The truth tastes like biting into a tree root. Bitter. Gritty. "You know about those, I'd imagine."

"My dad said they were terrifying. They sit another empath near you to gauge your reactions, and a neurotypical digs into your mind," says Abigail, and she lets out a curt huff of breath, derisive. "It's invasive and terrifying."

"If you can see the cracks, then they'll see the cracks," he says, and he leans back into the bench. The cold from the wood beneath seeps into his pants and chills the bottoms of his thighs. He'll need to take her inside soon. "You know what happens when they see the cracks."

"I know."

"…I need your help," he whispers, and it's glass shards in his mouth to admit it like that. His voice cracks on the way out.

"You need to fortify your walls."

"I can fool the neurotypical, but if the empath sees into my mind they'll turn on me," he says, aggrieved.

"They'll see it," she agrees firmly. "When you…when you put your hands to my neck. When you tried to save me, I…"

She pauses, and he watches her hands clench and unclench on her lap. Despite her resilience, her manipulations and her desperation, this is as difficult for her as it is for him. She'd almost been murdered by her father, after all. People don't just walk away from that.

Maybe she had cracks in her walls, too; small enough for many to miss, but there all the same.

"We bled together," Will whispers.

"I saw you as much as you saw me," she confesses, and she bites her lip so hard that the color flees them. "Even dying, I saw your cracks. My dad was so far in your head…he was so far in, and that's why we were so scared. It was like killing yourself, wasn't it? Putting a knife to me?"

"I'm sorry," he says, and he bites the fat of his cheek, hard.

"They'll see the cracks in your walls, Agent Graham," she says, and she sounds apologetic as she says it. "But I can help you hide them. We can put your secrets somewhere else."

"You can do that?" he wonders. Her power, her strength behind those eyes that held a thousand secrets makes his breath catch, and he looks to her, focusing on the eyebrow quirked just-so. There is the smallest turn of a smile at her lips as she regards him, cracked but not broken, wounded but still strong.

"I can do that. My father taught me well…with my help, you'll be able to do it, too."

-

"Let's talk about your sex life, Agent Graham."

Will's neck heats up despite himself, and he turns around to stare at Lecter blankly. In one hand he holds a book of nothing but paintings and art from Botticelli, and in the other he cradles the words of Poe.

"Non-existent," he replies curtly.

"I'd imagine that dating is difficult when you're an empath."

"…People enjoy physical contact as an act of affirmation for attraction," he replies, although it is somehow like sharing a sordid, embarrassing secret. "They don't like the gloves. Then, if you can get past the gloves, they want to stare lovingly into your eyes. They want you to dream worlds for them, a space where there is no distinction between you or them."

"People find your gifts to be romantic," Lecter observes.

"That, or they're repulsed," says Will cheerfully. He slides the book of Poe back onto the shelf. It feels too dramatic for someone like Lecter, so pleasant and affable as he sits and watches Will invade his work space with no hint of judgement or censure. "I don't date."

“I’d imagine that what you do have in regards to dating or intercourse would be more along the lines of a random, casual encounter with promises to call that never occur.”

Will paces along the strip of wood alongside the rug and focuses on the sturdy sound his shoes make; grounding and heavy. He imagines walls in his mind, strong and tall, reaching to great heights that none could topple.

“…Sex is…emotionally very painful for me,” he admits. “The emotions run so high that…whatever control I have, I lose. It’s invasive.”

“It has been that way since your first experience?”

“Yes.”

He continues pacing, thumbing through photos and narratives about the paintings of Botticelli. The colors are bold, bright against his eyes. He wonders which ones Hannibal likes, which ones he would most want displayed within the walls of his home.

He wonders if sex is as invasive and painful for Hannibal as it is for him.

“Tell me about it.”

“You want to know what losing my virginity was like?” Will’s eyebrows lift, and he glances up from the book. “…I’m feeling very Freudian. Should we discuss my mother, too?”

“Only if she’s in correlation to your first experience,” Hannibal replies with a smile.

Will laughs raggedly and snaps the book shut, leaning back against Hannibal’s desk to survey him. He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly and sets the book down, glancing away from him. Recounting the memories is never a pleasant affair; normally it begins at a bar when someone is taking the time to come onto him, before he can form the words around a heavy tongue that he’s not what they’re looking for.

“Her name was Molly,” he says after a while, and the name blisters on his tongue. “She was…sweet. I met her right outside of the academy. Just turned nineteen, and she wasn’t at all afraid of me.”

“Was she sympathetic to you?”

“Yes. Very understanding. We…waited a long time. I liked her, and I had fortresses for the things I Dreamed. She was…beautiful. Small town girl beautiful.”

“What happened?”

Will hated thinking this part, let alone admitting it to someone. “I dissociated. Completely. She just…had so much love for me, so much need, and I couldn’t be that. I couldn’t…differentiate between her and me. I had a need for something that I didn’t know, a person that I both was and wasn’t.

“I don’t entirely remember what happened. But I know that I panicked and I left her there. I snapped out of it sometime around five in the morning, and when I finally got a hold of her on the phone, she told me it was over.”

He finishes his confession and stares Hannibal down, daring him to shame him for it. His expression is the same impassive, calm face of someone used to hearing sordid, embarrassing things and not using them against anyone. Will isn’t quite sure if he should feel relieved or if he should feel mild displeasure at being unable to rattle him.

“And since then, you have not once allowed yourself to open up to anyone?” Hannibal asks lightly.

“Not like that. Maybe a random, chance meeting. Usually I’m drunk enough that it either makes the experience numbed enough that it sounds like a good idea, or I’m drunk enough that I just fall asleep and wake up the next morning with them gone.”

“Do you take them to your home?”

Will laughs and continues pacing, breaking eye contact. He can see him, though, just out of the corner of his eye. He thinks of what it’d be to bring someone to his home with genuine intent, someone that could walk into the space and not leave anything behind to trouble him when they’re gone. Such a thing couldn’t truly exist.

“I don’t let many people into my house,” he says after a bit, and he stops long enough to glance back. “Most people are…invasive. Uncomfortable with the set-up.”

“I’ll admit to surprise when I saw that you kept your bed in the front room,” Hannibal agreed. “Although I don’t make assumptions based off of someone’s sleeping habits.”

In truth, the compact notion of having all of his things confined to one simple, small area of the house makes things far easier for Will to compartmentalize rather than have it strewn about, but he remembers the first time Alana saw the layout, how her brow had furrowed and dipped in. Dr. Lecter may not have made assumptions, but Dr. Bloom certainly did.

“It’s too personal to have many people there,” Will says. “Their imprint remains long after.”

“You’ve made your home its own sort of fortress, and to have it sullied by so many hands would mean you don’t have a quiet place, even when they’re gone.”

“That, and the dogs don’t always like every person that shows up,” Will agrees with a wry smile. “By the way, thank you for looking after them. They look well fed and spoiled.”

“It was no trouble to me,” Hannibal assures him. “I love animals.”

“I guess that means you’re not a psychopath, right? Psychopaths generally torture and mutilate animals before they move onto people,” Will says thoughtfully.

Hannibal laughs a little, and Will stares at him, the fine lines and crinkles around his eyes, the dips near his mouth. It sounds genuine, but then again everything about Hannibal Lecter seems genuine. He is a person that knows exactly where he stands and what he is going to do, the paths he will take that lead him to wherever he wants to go.

Which begs the question: is he aware of just what the EBAU is doing? Did he know that Will was being investigated before he was assigned a psychiatrist?

Will wonders what the kind doctor would say if Will removed the files from his bag and showed them to him. They burn holes near the edges of the zipper, daring someone to look close enough to see just what he's done. Would Dr. Lecter help him? Would he take one look and turn him in to Jack Crawford, holding onto the scruff of his neck as one would scold a child?

That'd make Will an RA, too.

"I'm not a psychopath," Hannibal assures him, and Will smiles a little.

He likes Dr. Lecter, but he's not entirely sure if he can trust him. That burns worst of all.

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He takes the book at the insistence of Hannibal, and when he returns home he removes his gloves and passes his hands over every inch of his house. The feelings there are stale, like old newspaper left under the glare of the sun too long, but they are still present. He gets the sensation of dog slobber, of tails fwapping against the legs of a chair.

He also gleans the honest, stark taste of curiosity, of hands that too passed over the dusted tabletop like they were looking for something. Searching. Wanting. There is no maliciousness to the actions; no hint of secrecy or ill intent. Instead, Will senses a profound need, a hunger much like it'd felt when he touched his fingertips to the pages that Hannibal Lecter read so often in his book of Blake's poetry.

Will may be curious about Dr. Hannibal Lecter, but if the way he gently caressed the magnifying glass near his tackle is anything to go by, the good doctor is interested in Will, too.

It's that thought that sees him to bed with ease, even as he has to tuck Mrs. Hawthorne in to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Back to our regularly scheduled posts!

Thank you so very, very much for all of the love this has gotten. I've seen a lot of people talking about the solar eclipse, so maybe it's some kind of good luck to be posting on this day? ;)

A special thanks to my patrons, Emily Elm, Matilda, Sylarana, Inky-Starlight, Superlurk, and Duhaunt6! You're the best :)

What Tired Eyes do See

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10:

“You’re Will Graham.”

Will looked up, his gaze stopping just shy of meeting someone’s eyes. He paused mid-bite and held his sandwich, poised as a shield of sorts between him and the man in front of him.

“Yes.”

He was a stout, average-sized man clad in a suitcoat and aged dress shoes. His darker skin was pockmarked, wrinkled from time and hard work. FBI by the looks of him, although Will was certain that most people he met with these days were FBI. Graduating from the academy and going on to university did that, he supposed; he was an E-3, and everything he’d learned from psychiatrists to lecture halls to the Channel 5 news taught him that that was indeed a rare thing to be.

“Can I sit down?”

Will glanced to the blanket he had spread out underneath him, and he nodded an assent, swallowing a half-chewed bite of food with difficulty. He’d have to wash it later, but one thing he knew without really having to know was that you didn’t say ‘no’ to an FBI agent, especially if you wanted a job from them the way he did after graduation.

“My name is Jack Crawford,” he said, although he didn’t extend a hand to shake. Will’s hands were gloved, but he appreciated that this Jack wasn’t going to risk something like that, all for the sake of common social expectations. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Director of the EBAU?”

“Yes.”

Will nodded and set his sandwich down, brushing stray crumbs from his gloves. They were nice, just thin enough that he didn’t feel as though his hands were bulky, but not so thin that they threatened to come apart. They’d been a gift from one of his teachers.

It looks like you’ve got promise, based off of what your reports say,” Jack said lightly. “You’re interested in the EBAU?”

“I’ve been considering it, yes,” said Will, and he turned a chip over in his palm before he popped it into his mouth. “I’ve heard some good things and some bad things about empaths in the EBAU.”

“What have you heard?” Jack asked.

“They get burnt out pretty quickly with the constant work,” Will replied after a moment of thought. School taught him tact, the way to speak to someone while avoiding offense. Common sense taught him that he would be right to say his words with care when speaking to someone that could be his potential boss someday. “It’s grueling.”

“It’s grueling,” Jack Crawford agreed. “And there’s no guarantee of success. I’ve had people go into the FBI-EBAU training and ultimately fail. I’ve had them walked out, and I’ve had them carried out. It’s not an easy job.”

“Nope,” Will agreed.

“So my question for you, Will Graham, is why you’re interested in doing it? As an E-3, there are a lot of career opportunities that could be lined up for you without you having to risk your psyche.”

Will’s psyche was common enough talk. He’d grown used to it, over the years, the casual way people mentioned his state of mind. It was like the cancer patient sitting at the dinner table, everyone discussing their condition without any true consideration to the one actually enduring it.

He looked across the lawn, tracked a few people making their way to class. He wasn’t much in the way of friends at the Academy, much to the woes of his teachers. He couldn’t quite track their casual mannerisms, their behaviors and mode of speech. More often than not, he was off to the side of them, hearing but not entirely listening. They were disquieted by him as much as he was uncomfortable by them.

“…I want to help people,” he said at last, and he picked up his sandwich to take another bite. He spoke around his food, gauging Jack’s reaction to the lack of general manners. “I thought about my career, and…I have these gifts. They’re troublesome at times, but they’re useful. I could be useful to you.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes.”

“What makes you think that?” Jack asked.

He swallowed a mouthful and wiped his mouth. “I know your wife has cancer, and she’s dying. I know your air conditioner in the car must be broken, and I know that your cat can only rub up on your leg for so long before it’s a pain and you nudge them away.”

Jack looked like a sour mix between pleasant surprise and mild distaste at being read so bluntly. His lips puckered, twisted at the mention of his wife and he turned his head to survey the other empaths hurrying to and from class, Will part of them but just not quite part of them.

"...You got all that from a glance?" Jack asked once he could control his voice rather than sound annoyed.

"No."

"Then how'd you know?" he demanded.

"Teachers talk about your wife all of the time," Will said, ticking off his fingers as he spoke. "Your dress shirt and jacket are wet and smell like Freon, and there's cat hair on the bottom of your leg. Only about halfway around the cuff, so they started to rub up on you and you stopped them." He shrugged carelessly, lowering his hands and avoiding Jack's suspicious expression.

"...That's observant of you," Jack said slowly.

"If I can glean all that just from being observant and listening, just think what happens when I actually use my gifts," Will said, and he took a mildly triumphant sip of soda. He was eighteen, and the world felt more or less at the tips of his fingers, despite being an empath. "You don't just want me for the EBAU, Agent Jack Crawford. You need me."

Will is just about to open his file when he gets a call.

He should have opened it the night before, but the chilling thought of Dr. Lecter being part of the things happening around him was too much; he'd paced the confines of his house for most of the night before succumbing to a restless sleep. He drags his fingers around the corner edge of the file and answers his phone, mulling over an odd feeling in his gut, like he's committing a grievous sin just by having these.

He deserves the truth, though, doesn't he? Even the parts of it that hurt?

"Graham."

"Will, it's Jack. I'm sending an address, and I need you here, stat."

"Is it Dolarhyde?" Will asks. He stands up from his dining room table and scoops the files into his bag, propping his phone up by his ear. The idea of Dolarhyde striking so soon (probably striking against Slowinski, wherever *they* were) makes his skin tingle, and he zips up his bag with jittery fingers.

"It's the stag-man, Will." Jack sounds aged, old and weathered. "I told them you're already up to your elbows in this, but he's struck again and the Feeler can't get a good grip on it. I said you could swing by."

Not Dolarhyde, but the copycat. The stag-man, Jack called him. Will mulls that over, pausing by his wallet and keys near the door. The dogs watch with rabid attention, and he pets Buster who was tenacious enough to climb onto the armchair for one last pet.

This is the sort of thing you have the capacity to be.

"Jack…"

“I know you’re working hard on the case, but they need help. Can you do it?”

It’s an innocent question, but it raises the hairs on the back of his neck. He supposes that it’s that damn tone once again that sets his teeth on edge. Can you do it, like he has enough on his plate without Jack giving him something else to worry over, something else to do. Can you do it, like empaths left and right can’t see his walls cracking, like sooner or later this is going to make him spill over the edges of his finely crafted safe space until there’s nothing left of him but the memories and feelings of everyone else crammed inside.

Can you do it? Jack asks him.

“You need me, Jack, I’m there,” Will says, and he’s out the door, locking it behind himself. At this point and time, he can’t afford to say no. The tingle, the lingering sensation sits just against his skin, a reminder that he is being watched, even now. Even now, there is someone that lurks, taking notes and making observations that more than likely determine his future within the EBAU, whether he likes it or not.

“Thanks, Will,” Jack says, pleased. “I’ll text the address.”

-

It’s a house of mirrors that Will is led to, and he has to wade through curious onlookers nearby in order to reach the police line. People whisper, quick hisses like sharp needles, and he is careful with his sleeves as he brushes by them, avoiding their eyes. Large crowds, and he has to focus especially hard on his walls, how sturdy they are. Dreamers have imaginations that run the gauntlet, shift and become realities as well as their distortions. He glances to the side, spies a spilled slushie, and he can see the child that tripped as their mother hurried them along.

He ducks beneath the police line, the corner of it dragging across his ear –the officer that put it up was impatient, harried. Death was common, but not this sort. Not in this town, not in his repertoire.

He spies Dr. Lecter standing near Alana, but he doesn’t acknowledge them. There’s an odd twist in his gut, their dipped heads and quick mouths turned from the breeze that sluices through the various carnival stands to nip at exposed skin. His nose is cold already, and he rubs it, continuing his path towards the walkway where Jack waits.

He can’t trust Alana –she’s employed by the EBAU. He can’t trust Hannibal?

The Caverns of the Grave I’ve seen, and these I show’d to England’s Queen. But now the Caves of Hell I view, Who shall I dare to show them to?

Me, Agent Graham; you show them to me.

It’s a bitter thought that his words shared within the confines of their space could become twisted, used against him. Even when he sees Hannibal Lecter turn towards him out of the corner of his eye, he doesn’t pause to acknowledge him. Lecter potentially sharing his

uncomfortable sexual encounters with Jack is fine. Hannibal sharing any bouts of *instability*, however…

"How are you, Will?" Jack asks.

"Cold," he says, and he follows him along the steps to the house of mirrors.

Overhead, in cheerfully oblong letters, the neon lights glow and flicker in welcome. Will ducks his head underneath and blinks into the shaded gloom that smells of the sweat of children, the stale smell of vomit, and bleach cleaner. It's warmer, though, more contained.

The mirrors bounce his reflection about, first short and fat, then skinny and oblong. Each turn and curve of his person is reflected through the mirrors on every which side with reckless and random shapes, and it's with a slow, unsteady gait that he navigates behind Jack towards where the body is. At one particular corner, when he opens his mouth to ask Jack the particulars, his mouth gapes and his teeth look far too large. Predatory. He closes his mouth and counts the many angles and distortions of his person with every passing mirror.

"Victim is Randall Tier, male, twenty-two years old," Jack says, pausing at a corner. He turns back to Will and frowns, the deep lines of his face grooved and unpleasant. "It's messy."

So was the Hobbs house. Will nods seriously, steels himself, then steps into the other room with his walls firmly intact.

It's messy.

He has to stare for a long, long time before he can quite talk himself into lowering his walls. The Dreams are already unfolding, though, taking him to a space in which he can't quite grasp onto any of his footholds, and when he takes a breath he can almost *feel* his pupils expanding as he falls into the eyes of the person long dead, even as his hands that are suddenly ungloved comes down to rest at his shoulders.

You who hide, you who lurks beneath this mask, this façade where all is well and good, where your innermost thoughts are tamped down through chemicals and strict schedule; just where do you place your dreams?

Eye to eye we look, yet yours are glazed, distanced. There is nothing more to you than the fact that your heart beats, your lungs expand and contract. You exist, but to what end? To what end can you live when the only thing that you can say with utmost assurity is that you are alive?

Each swift, smooth cut of the scalpel is magic. Each layer that curls and peels down, sinew clinging to the space where muscle and skin would connect creates a sheen until it splits and allows the skin to lay flat, revealing the truth beneath.

Revealing the monster beneath.

He stops at the neck, having peeled away the skin that shows the man, revealing the muscle and bone in grotesque manner that reflects by the thousands within the mirrors abound. Mirrors, mirrors that reflect, distort, change reality until there is nothing there of the truth any longer. With calm hands they work, a steady breath. Their heartbeat keeps even time, as this is not the first time they have killed, nor is it the last.

I who Dreamed you this world in which you could be who you were meant to be; you who trusted me to show you just how wonderful this life could become. I harbor no ill will at your choice to let them sedate you, allowing them to Change you.

You are now no more than a tool, though, a tool to help another change and grow:

Can you see, Agent Graham? Do you not understand what they're trying to force you to be?

Will throws his barriers up at the question, the ringing clarity that reflects and refracts around his walls. Can you see? Can you see?

Can you see?

"He's an empath," Will says, and his voice trembles. He looks around for Jack, but it is with startling realization that he's alone in the room, alone and ultimately vulnerable as he sees himself the way the rest of the world probably does: oblong, obscure, rendered in shadows and ultimately disarming. His knees are in the puddle of blood that'd collected around the body, and he stands up with a start, ungloved hands flexing and curling to fists. When had he ungloved them? When had he moved so close?

Can you see?

"Jack?" he calls out, and he skirts the victim whose skin peeled back from their face rests just at knee-height, slumped into a fashion of kneeling. Randall's hands reach for his neck, grasping, as though he could tear away the fabric that he constructed around himself, all for the sake of keeping everyone around him happy.

Can you see?

He winds through the halls, but there is no Jack. There is only his face, his gaunt and horrifyingly twisted face staring back at him, and he's just beginning to lose his breath when he is grabbed from behind and is wrenched around sharply.

"I-"

"Agent Graham," Hannibal says lightly, calmly. His grip is not hard, although it is firm. He passes a hand along Will's shoulder, then stops and releases him, lips twitching into a frown. "Are you alright?"

"…Yes," Will says slowly, and he takes a step back. Just over Dr. Lecter's shoulder, his eyes are the size of pinpricks, although his forehead juts out comically. "Where's Jack?"

“He received a call and stepped outside,” he replies. “I thought to come in and see if you’re alright.”

“I’m fine,” he lies, and he curls his bottom lip into his mouth.

Lecter cants his head just-so, although whatever thought crosses his mind doesn’t show through his eyes. It’s the first time Will finds himself frustrated at the fact, truly and honestly bothered by it because if he could just *see* then he’d know whether or not it was safe to tell Hannibal Lecter what was going on.

Can you see?

“…The…the killer here is an empath,” Will says because he can tell that Dr. Lecter is waiting for him to say something, *anything* other than ‘I’m fine.’ “He…he knew his victim. He dreamed him walls, barriers, potentials for what he could be, but…when the victim didn’t take the offer, he instead killed him.”

“You felt his empathic abilities?”

“I *heard* him,” Will whispers. His hands flex, curl, then stretch as he swings his arms. Over Lecter’s shoulder, his face twists and bows in. “He’s…he’s taunting me.”

“Taunting you?”

“He’s-”

Will stops himself right there, though, pausing on the expression in Lecter’s eyes. In truth, it’s a micro-expression –if he hadn’t been staring so intently, he’d have missed it.

Excitement. Curiosity.

“He’s?” Lecter prompts gently.

Can you see?

“…It feels like a taunt, at least,” Will says instead, and he looks away from Lecter. How far can he backtrack before Lecter is certain of his instability? Has he already said too much, given too much? Were his words poised to become weapons against him, and he only just barely caught Lecter’s excitement in finally having the excuse to tell jack to pull the plug? He pats aimlessly over his pockets, trying to find his gloves, and he gives a start when Lecter reaches for him in the gloom of the mirrors and grabs his hand, stilling it. His own hands are gloved from the chill outside; perhaps that is the only reason he was comfortable in reaching.

“Agent Graham, you don’t have to censor yourself,” he says lightly. “I’m here to be a grounding rod for you in cases such as this.”

Will very carefully pulls his hand from Lecter’s grasp, nodding mutely.

“I should find Jack,” he says, and he shifts, turning about to hunt for the exit.

Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees Lecter prepared for a mild fight; after a tense breath, though, the expression fades to a congenial, calm expression, and he nods.

"To Agent Crawford, then," he says, and he leads Will out of the house of mirrors.

Outside, Jack is still on the phone, although he nods in understanding when he sees Will. Will wonders if the blood on the knees of his slacks will stand out in the fall afternoon, or if he wore a dark enough shade to hide it.

"…Is something the matter, Will?" Dr. Lecter asks. His back is to Jack, and Will can practically feel the unspoken attempt at meeting his eyes. He can't look at him, though; he thinks of the articles that he's read so many times the words are imprinted on his eyelids, and he grits his teeth. He wants to trust Lecter. He *needs* to trust Lecter.

"You're my psychiatrist, aren't you, Dr. Lecter?"

"Yes. Was that not clear before?"

"You're employed by the FBI, though."

"They did hire me, yes." He shifts, crowding into Will's personal space. "You're shutting me out. Has something happened?"

Had something happened? Will watches the forensics team heading into the room of mirrors, the annotator nearby, watching him with an expression of distaste, seeing as how he'd managed to slip in there without her. The cold air stings his cheeks, and he shrugs, non-committed.

"I think I'm just tired, Dr. Lecter."

"You have been withdrawn since returning from Louisiana."

"Maybe it was the invasive questions about my sex life," Will returns hotly. "Who knows?"

Rather than match his snark with aggression, Lecter has the grace to look away from him. He tracks Jack's pacing, much like Will does, tucking his hands into his pockets.

"I would apologize, but you know that I'm not sorry," he says lightly. "However, if I ask any question from you that you find to be invasive, please tell me in the future. I am here to be of help to you, not a hindrance."

"…I don't care about you knowing about my sex life," he says heavily. "What would you do with that sort of information?"

"Wonder at your lack of any emotional ties that extend from the FBI. You have no outlet for your troubles, no emotional support in times of need."

He isn't wrong, although it sting. It was something much like what Abigail said, sitting side-by-side in a hospital garden.

You're so…alone.

"If you had access to the truth, Dr. Lecter, would you want to know?" Will asks. "No matter how ugly, how damning it was, wouldn't you want it?"

"Yes," he replies without hesitation, and he rocks back onto his heels. Just a short distance away, Jack is hanging up the phone. "Ignorance is bliss, but anyone can make a paradise from their reality if they're tenacious enough to take it."

Jack walks over before Will has a chance to reply, and he shifts, putting some distance between them. His fingers rub together, confined in their gloves, and he tucks his hands behind his back so that he can better remove them without notice.

"He's an empath, Jack," Will says, and Jack pauses, mouth open and slack with the words he was about to say. His mouth snaps shut, and he shifts, looking between Hannibal and Will. He suddenly looks much older.

"An empath."

"Sounds like a Dreamer, and one powerful enough to weaponize it," Will explains. "He knew him personally."

"I got some records pulled from this guy by Zeller back at HQ."

"I thought that he was working on Dolarhyde?"

"They need their best on this, Will," Jack says wearily. "If he's a Dreamer, it's no wonder our Feelers can't get anything from him."

"Can empaths use their gifts as weapons like this?" Hannibal asks.

Will and Jack exchange a look before Will glances over and nods slowly, once.

"It's not…common," he says. "It's actually illegal."

So is hiding an empath right underneath the nose of the FBI. So is stealing confidential files from your boss.

"Would it be an agent, then?"

Will gives Jack a look, and they shift about uncomfortably. Awkwardly. "Another RA?" Will asks quietly. "I didn't get that impression. This was calculated, not…a fractured mind."

"I'll get a hold of Director Purnell," Jack says reluctantly. "You're sure it's not Dolarhyde?"

"Dolarhyde felt as though he was…slipping downhill. This person is in complete control of everything they do." *Even as they taunted you with it.*

Can you see, Agent Graham? Do you not understand what they're trying to force you to be?

"We may have to do a full empath examination," Jack says, and god he just sounds so *tired*. "Time that with Dolarhyde, we just don't-"

"I'll find him, Jack," Will promises, and he sounds so sincere that even Will almost believes the words as he says them. As he passes by Jack, he allows his hand to glide along his back, pausing to pat his shoulder ever-so-slightly. "Don't worry. I'll find Dolarhyde. Then we'll find this guy."

He waits until he's far enough away that Jack won't notice him sliding his gloves on, palms tingling with the secrets that he was able to steal.

-

That night, the files sit on his table, tempting him. He paces before the only mirror in the house –the one in his bathroom–before he stops in front of it and grabs onto the counter, staring at himself.

Staring into his eyes.

He doesn't fall into them the way that he does with everyone else. According to Abigail, though, that is something that he needs to learn to do, to crawl within the spaces of his own mind so that he can see what other empaths could see.

He stares at his eyes for a long time. The awkward seconds roll to minutes. Minutes become an hour. Then two.

After two and a half, he gives up and sits down on the toilet seat, head in his hands. Apparently, the only person that *can't* see into his mind, is him.

Then again, he could very well be distracted by what he gleaned off of Jack when he brushed against him earlier:

Keep watching Graham –if he continues to go and see Abigail Hobbs, let me know.

We're going to try and track down Slowinski, maybe beat Dolarhyde to him. He's getting revenge, you know. We've pissed off an E-2 that knows how to weaponize his gifts.

No, Graham never learned to weaponize his talents. I'd know it if he had.

If he learns how, I'll find out. We'll retire him.

I'm not concerned, though. Will Graham needs us as much as we need him.

He thinks of whoever it is that's now killed two people, two people that Will didn't know, but now knows in a fundamentally *wrong* way. They are trying to tell him something, *show* him something –just who are they that know his troubles and rather than run and tell the

FBI, they instead want to help him? Just who are they that see the way blood drips through the crevices of his mind and can somehow see the beauty of it rather than the obscenity?

Can you see?

Chapter End Notes

:) Thank you guys so much for all of your support!! I've had so much fun writing this/working on this and I'm just so thankful and happy that you guys have, too!

A special thanks to my patrons: Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! <3

What Shaking Hands do Feel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11:

He stands in the grocery aisle and stares at the cereal for far longer than one normally stares at cereal. Will would like to think that it's because he's honestly torn between 'Cocoa Cream of Wheat' versus 'Maple Cream of Wheat', but in reality he's exhausted, plagued by dreams where he stood before his bathroom mirror and peeled the skin off of his face. Each time he woke, his nails were dug into his skin, small, livid crescents that he worries are still present if one squints just the right way. He blinks the dregs of sleep from his eyes and wonders if the employees would mind if he just eats the coffee grounds straight from the bag in his basket.

Can you see?

"What's your favorite?"

He looks to the small child that stands nearby, devoid of a parental figure. A quick scan of the aisle shows that they stand alone, but they don't seem perturbed. He licks chapped lips and glances back to the rows upon rows of sugar-coated cardboard, feigning interest.

"I'd say…this one," he says, pointing towards one labeled 'Fruity Pebbles'. "Have you tried it before?"

"That one gets stuck to my teeth," the child says, pointing towards their teeth. They're missing the front two, a fact that they're proud of. Will can see it in their smile, the way their hand lingers near their mouth before they let it gape just enough to show it off.

"What's your favorite?" he asks.

"I like this one," they say, and they reach up on their tip-toes in order to haul down a huge box of Life cereal.

"That's a healthy cereal," says Will with a small smile.

"I can like healthy cereal."

"You can," Will agrees. He looks about once more, and spying no adults nearby, he kneels down so that he can be level with the child. "Where are your parents?"

"Looking at the cans," they say. "Why do you have purple under your eyes?"

That takes him a moment, until he thinks of the shadows and dips just under his eyes from poor sleep.

“I colored it. What do you think?” he turns his head to the side to better show them.

“It’s silly.”

“It is.”

He glances to the side once more, then looks back and ventures, “What cans are your parents looking at?”

“Baking aisle,” the child says, and Will nods.

“I think that we should go find them,” he decides, and he stands up, offering his gloved hand to them. The child readily accepts it, squeezing tight, and he marvels at it for the briefest of moments, that a child would grab onto his hand so willingly. Gloved, their presence and blind trust are mere ideas, something made powerful moreso by its ambiguity rather than its steadfast statement. He squeezes their hand back lightly, and he heads to the grocery aisle.

Their parents are overjoyed and confused when he hands the child over, and there is an air of suspicion coupled with their relief.

“I’m an officer,” he explains, to settle the fears that lurk in their eyes. Better officer than having to explain FBI Agent, he figures. “I thought it better I bring her to you than let them wander around the grocery store.”

“Thank you, sir,” the father says, and he scoops the child up to properly keep a hand on them. “Normally, she’s not the type to wander off. Are you, honey?”

“He colored purple under his eyes,” she says, and she points.

“Don’t point,” her mother scolds.

“Where was she?”

“Cereal aisle.”

“I wanted Life Cereal,” she explains.

“Thank you, sir,” the mother says graciously. When she smiles, her lips curve naturally, without hesitation. “Never a day off for law enforcement, right?”

“Never,” he agrees, and he sees himself down the aisle, all the while the small girl’s parents waste their breath trying to explain why it’s not safe to wander off and talk to strangers.

Will has never really been given that sort of consideration, blind trust because he’d been kind, because his actions say he is a decent person. Usually, his interactions circulate the hushed whispers of ‘he’s an E-3’ and ‘that’s the only E-3 not stuck in an institution.’

Given the way of his mind, Will figures they'd better work harder at ingraining a sense of distrust in that little girl. He may have been kind, but the thoughts that circulate his crumbling mind certainly aren't.

-

Alana is waiting for him in his office, and whatever hope he'd had in reading the files then are set to the wayside. They whisper, reaching for her with their sordid secrets. Despite her kindness, Will is well aware that she would take one look at them and turn him in to Jack -worse still, Director Purnell, Dolarhyde's old boss.

I will not give you leave to obtain it.

"I thought I'd check up on you," she says as he sets his things to the side and boots up his computer. He tosses his backpack and a shopping bag to the side, onto the uninhabited chair.

"I went grocery shopping," he explains when she looks from the grocery bag to him. "I was out of coffee."

"No time after work?"

"I've been working late hours."

"How late?"

Will frowns at the question, the sensation of something more underneath her words. He glances up to her, studies the curve of her cheek, the hesitation in her mouth. Reading Alana is easy, even when he can sense her attempting to not be read.

"Not obsessively late," he says, sharper than intended. "Not RA sort of late."

"No one thinks you're going to be an RA."

"Liar."

Alana leans back in her chair and crosses a leg, arms folding over her chest as a barrier of sorts. Despite her understanding of empaths, she certainly hates that Will can read her so well.

"No one thinks that you're going to be an RA, but you have to understand, Will," she says. Will sits back and gets comfortable, mimicking her stance with sardonically rapt attention. "With Hobbs…you got too close. You're going to visit Abigail Hobbs quite often-"

"She has literally no one in this entire world that-"

"-and all anyone is worried about is whether or not you're seeing her as a federal agent or as her father," she continues, talking over him.

Will grits his teeth and shifts his stance. “I’m not her father. We…I touched her neck as she died, Dr. Bloom. She finds…relief that there is someone that knows *exactly* what it is that she went through that day. It makes her feel less alone.”

That makes Alana pause. Perhaps, in their suspicion, no one thought to question that, to wonder if Will’s meeting Abigail was at her request or his own. That says something to Will, that they first suspected his mind of fractures rather than question the state of Abigail’s.

Granted, their suspicions aren’t without merit, but it tells him more than he was looking for, none-the-less.

“We’re just worried, Will,” Alana says at last.

“I’d say not to worry, but…that’s your job. You worry about empaths, I hunt empaths, Dolarhyde watched empaths, and Hobbs once was an empath. We all have our place.”

“You *help* empaths, Will. You don’t…*hunt* them,” Alana corrects softly.

“I hunt them down so that you, the psychiatrist, can help them,” he says, and he’s backtracking because he can hear Dolarhyde’s tone in his voice as he speaks, a sneer that says the FBI isn’t as innocent as it seems.

God, if he could just *read* the *fucking files*…

“You’re crucial to that, though. Jack told me that he’s given you another case, and really I don’t think it’s healthy.”

“It’s another empath, although I don’t think it’s an agent. Unregistered, non-fractured mind. They’ve weaponized their gifts. Jack feels like I’m the only one that can find them.”

“Can you?” Alana wonders. “When you’re under this much pressure?”

“I can find them,” he assures her, and he leans back in his chair to stretch. “I’ll find them, I’ll find Dolarhyde, then you can step in and help them build walls that make them… better.”

“Don’t hold the guilt of Abigail Hobbs over your head, Will,” Alana says firmly. “That, no matter what happened, was a win. Don’t feel bad for yourself in that regard.”

Will thinks of Abigail risking everything so that he can build walls and protect himself, *weaponize* himself, and he nods in agreement. He logs into his computer and pulls up his e-mail, finally looking away from Alana who radiates poise, honestly, strength, but above all a sense of justice that just isn’t contusive to his work at this moment.

“I don’t pity myself,” he assures her, logging into his e-mail. As it loads, he leans back in his chair and regards her with something akin to amusement, that he can read her so well as he blatantly lies and keeps Abigail’s secret for another day. “With Abigail…I feel… good. I feel like I’m doing good.”

“Good, Will,” she says with a genuine smile. “Dr. Lecter said that you’ve been reading books he’s loaned you.”

That makes his stomach drop.

“…Yes,” he says slowly, and he can sense the shift in her cadence, the sudden change of her tone. It tastes like resignation.

“I was a little surprised. You often don’t like reading books because you have to wear gloves to read them.”

“I have a weakness for Blake,” he says, and he glances over to his e-mails. There are three unread, one sent from Kade Purnell to the EBAU in its entirety.

“He says you had him look after your dogs.”

“You were out of town and he offered.”

“Do you like him, Will?” Alana asks, and he clicks on the e-mail so that he can avoid her eyes. He can taste the air, the sense of a potent jealousy and an uncomfortable and mildly unprofessional conversation.

“…I respect Dr. Lecter,” he says slowly.

“You’ve gotten coffee together.”

“I was told that I needed to socialize more.”

“With your psychiatrist?”

“You’re my psychiatrist, and we’ve gotten coffee together,” Will points out. “Do the years mean that it’s different?”

“Time makes it different, as we’ve known each other for years,” she points out. “I know that you don’t socialize much outside of work, so it caught me off guard to hear that.”

“It’s just coffee,” he assures her, “we’re not golfing together.”

The look she gives him is troublesome at best with the censure in it.

“I just know that when you like something, you tend to get a little…”

“What?” he asks sharply. “What do I get?”

“Obsessive.”

“Obsessive,” he repeats flatly.

“I took a look at the tablet you’ve been borrowing from Beverly-”

“-She must not use it a whole lot to not need it back yet-”

"-and you had it pulled open to over twenty tabs of his articles," she continues, talking over him.

"…I'm allowed to read articles that interest me," he says slowly. His gaze shifts from the e-mail from Purnell then back to Alana, and he sits back in his chair, letting it squeak loudly in the room. "Aren't I?"

"When you liked me-"

"I already assured you, *years* ago, that it was nothing. A mild interest because you'd seemed interesting at the time. I satiated my curiosity, and it was done."

"You satiated your curiosity by having agents from the EBAU follow me around in order to ensure that I remained safe," she retorts. "Are you doing the same with Dr. Lecter?"

"No! I was…going through a difficult time, and you know that. It's not the same."

She tries a different tactic, and he can sense the shift of it, the frustration that that avenue was so quickly shut down.

"You have a habit of creating these worlds within mere instances, Will, where lives and stories and people are lived out based off of a few interactions. It's one of the catches of a Dreamer, and you have two other gifts that only add to that. I'm just worried that you're doing the same with Dr. Lecter."

Will thinks of the two of them, huddled together and speaking quietly with one another, at ease and at peace with their place in the world. Had Dr. Lecter said something? Had it bothered him when he saw the articles, displayed so ridiculously for just anyone to realize that his interest was far beyond patient-therapist? His poker face was so well constructed that it was difficult to tell, a struggle to know just what he thought of Will.

Perhaps *he* sent Alana to Will, to have a buffer between the two of them.

"…That was a long time ago," Will says slowly, and he looks up to fix his stare at Alana's nose. "It's embarrassing and, quite frankly, frustrating that you feel the need to bring that up when all that I'm trying to do is truly and honestly help myself through therapy. Everyone here has harped on me to do it, to be part of it, and now that I am, you're giving me a lecture? Just what do I have to make you happy, Dr. Bloom?

"I'm reading books now, something I've avoided for a long time because the texture isn't right in gloved hands. I'm socializing, reaching out when I'm struggling, and going to face down the fears of falling into Abigail Hobbs' mind again. I'm working, and I don't feel entirely too stressed about two cases rather than one. I'm having conversations that aren't just about my mind and its gifts, and all that you can talk about when you sit down across from is now that I'm feeling better, you want to bring up all of the things of my past that went wrong."

She doesn't have a quick answer to that, and he can smell her embarrassment like a bad perfume that permeates the air. She can't maintain his almost-gaze, and she looks down,

gripping her briefcase tightly, a grounding rod. It's difficult for Alana to admit that she's made a mistake.

He can empathize with that, seeing as how her thought process isn't wrong in the least.

Doesn't mean that he's going to admit it, though.

"I *am* happy that this therapy seems to be working for you, Will," she says at last. "Where we've only seen you in therapy with me, I suppose none of us really recognized the Will Graham that appears when the therapy is actually working."

The smile she gives him is sincere and mildly embarrassed.

"I'll communicate my thought processes more if that will help you. With Abigail Hobbs…it's mentally helped me to help her. To see her as alive and here, and to validate her fears and trauma to help her overcome them. I think that's helped more than a group session with other empaths where it becomes a humble-brag as to who endured the most mentally straining work recently."

She opens her mouth to protest that, but at his shit-eating grin, she stops and shakes her head, laughing a little.

"Just keep me in the loop, Will," she says at last, standing up. "Whatever Dr. Lecter is doing that's having such an effect on you, I hope he keeps doing it."

She sees herself out, and Will is still smiling, up until the door closes.

Then he looks to the E-mail from Kade Purnell to the entire EBAU, and his stomach drops.

Due to a breach in coded information, all personnel are to change their passwords, effective immediately. Passwords must contain two uppercase letters, two numbers, two symbols, and no words.

-

That night, Will can't get Alana's words out of his head. He reasons that it makes sense for it to trouble him, seeing as how he isn't doing as well as he claims, and Lecter's therapy isn't entirely working –

-That doesn't quite give him the right to break into his office at late hours, though.

He's wading into deep waters, though, and he has to know just who he can trust. Lecter says to trust him, to allow him to help Will through his troubles, but just what would he do were Will to come forward with everything going on within his mind? Just how would he ease Will's burdens? A report to Director Hanson? A report to Jack?

A report to Purnell?

He's stalling and he knows it, not opening those files he took. Stalling because he's afraid of what he'll find, the things he'll see behind each brown folder. Perhaps if he doesn't open it, it's not quite the crime that it will be once it does? Perhaps he doesn't want to quite admit that he's afraid of what he'll find, the Will Graham that he'll see within each page, through the eyes of a person that can see nothing but his weaknesses?

If he felt that he could at least trust *someone*…

He can trust Dolarhyde not to kill him. That's somewhat of a relief, in truth.

Picking locks is easy, and Will lets himself into the office with only the mildest sense of guilt. He closes and locks the door behind himself, and it's with a slow, lazy turn that he stares about the muted, dark room. Without the lights and Lecter's presence, it's not as comfortable. It's somehow bleak in the shadows, shrouded with the secrets that his patients dare to tell.

He removes his gloves and walks around, getting a taste for the air. It smells like work, hunger, fears, and comfort. He avoids the chair that patients sit in, and he instead sits in the chair across from it, leaning back into it and letting out a loose, rumpled breath of air.

Like before, he doesn't fall into memories and thoughts. He can only gain impressions, emotions. Boredom, concern, interest, curiosity; Will sifts through the feelings of a person that is not altogether impressed with what was paraded before him. A patient (or many patients) left him displeased, a sense of boredom like there should be something *more*.

He stands and moves about the room, fingertips gliding along the spines of books, gleaning off of them burning questions, nostalgic yearning, and the pang of an unanswered question. The impressions on the curved metal of the elk are old, old enough that he hasn't touched it in sometime, although there is a feeling of quiet contemplation on the curtains.

Will wanders over to the patient files tucked into a small, unobtrusive bookcase back behind the desk. He is not so much nosey about the others that Dr. Lecter sees –why care over their troubles when his own are so tumultuous? He glides fingers just a hair's-breadth away from the books until he finds his own, and he sets it on the desk, palm pressed flat to it.

Curiosity. Hunger. Worry. Amusement.

Will's teeth worry at his lip as he sits down at the desk, one palm pressed to wood that feels like artistic inspiration, the other pressed to a binding that doesn't whisper of treacherous thoughts. He debates opening his file, reading everything within, but much like the one that sits in his briefcase, this one foretells a lot about him, first and foremost whether or not another person believes him to be entirely stable.

The thought of Dr. Lecter thinking anything less of him than hope and respect is too much to bear.

He can't read it; instead, he thumbs through the pages, letting the smell of paper and book bindings fall over him. Fingertips glean fondness from among later pages, a burning sense of intrigue in the middle. He's jolted by a mere whisper of attraction, something

sensual that makes the back of his neck hot. He can only catch glimpses of words as he turns the pages too fast:

Stand, eyes, think, I, when, empath, to, potential, smile

It's the last one that makes him stop and look down just long enough that he can read the full sentence, curious.

That is the first time that I believe I've seen him honestly smile.

He traces over the word, and there it is again: a lurching tug on his heart, a murmur that there is something more there, something more than the titles and the jobs and the words. There is no hint of betrayal. There is no hint of duty over desire. There is an honest sense of want, of a hunger. Will can relate to that.

He forces himself to put the book away, and he sits in Dr. Lecter's desk chair for a long time, thinking.

Alana may call it obsessive, but what would she know of it? She was not one that could hear and feel the impressions and thoughts of another, to fall into the minds around her unwillingly. To feel from Dr. Lecter the very things he himself sometimes feels…

Maybe he could trust him after all.

-

He manages to lose his tail at the farmer's market.

It's not as easy as it sounds; Will has to duck about the roving masses of people, immersing himself without touching anyone. There is that fear that near-cripples him at first that he'll be undone by the feelings of the crowd around him. It's one of the last farmer's markets now that it is officially Fall, and there is a rush to purchase as many rustic and handmade items before they have to wait the cold months until spring.

He keeps his jacket buttoned and his collar turned up to avoid skin-to-skin contact, and he plunges in.

Halfway through the crowd, when he glances back, he can spot someone scanning the crowd, far too much interest in the way they pause and study dark-haired men. He turns down a small avenue and stops just long enough to purchase a hat. For time's sake, he uses cash, shoulders hunkered as though he were cold and not trying to hide.

"Do you have one that no one has tried on?" he asks.

"Sensitive skin?" the person asks kindly.

"Very."

When he dons the cap, he gives them a brief smile and disappears back into the crowd.

He doesn't drive to see Reba; it's only two miles away from the farmer's market, and he wants to keep his tail detained there as long as possible. Instead, he walks with his head ducked, mindlessly thumbing through his phone. There isn't much of interest there, but he hopes that if someone was able to make their way to his general direction, they'd pass over him as nothing more than a disenchanted member of the blue collar task force, tired and worn out from the long work week.

He's let into her work space, and Will stands in the dark for a long time, relishing in it. The hum of technology is muted, and he allows himself to enjoy the quiet, the dark. It's a gamble to be here, should they manage to find him, but he needs a quiet space to work, a place he feels comfortable enough to think.

"Agent Graham?"

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, Miss McClane, but I…was wondering if I could utilize your work space."

"Trying to develop film?" she asks, and she doesn't sound as though she minds his company in the least. He thinks of his love for her, his affection that was sincere and real and true, then has to carefully set it to the side; that is Dolarhyde's love, not Will's.

"Something like that."

"Well, this room stays dark, as you know, but you can use it for what you like. Can you see in the dark, Agent Graham?"

"I can see a lot of things," he assures her.

"Well, alright then," she says with a laugh. "Take two steps to your right, then up three. There's a desk there for you."

"Thank you." He follows her orders, then reaches into his pack and removes a pair of night vision goggles –they wouldn't be missed from the weapons locker for awhile. They paint the room in wavering shades of green, and just across the way from him, Reba stands poised beside a large piece of machinery. Her eyes blink slowly, languidly in his direction.

"Are you…getting close to finding Mr. D?" she asks.

"Yes," he replies. After a thought he adds, "And no."

"Do you think that he can be helped?"

Will pulls out the files he's been trying to find the time to read, and he stares down at them, focusing first on his own, then Dolarhyde's.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," he says, and with shaking hands he opens the file.

Chapter End Notes

A bit late posting, but I just barely got back from PAX con this weekend in Seattle --it was such a blast! There was so much to do/see, and I got to meet up with a ton of old friends.

A special thanks to my patrons: Emily Elm, Matilda, Sylarana, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk -you're the best!!

And thank you to everyone that has read/commented/shared this work. That honestly means so much to me.

When Walls No Longer Stand

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 12:

It wasn't his own nightmares that woke him. Normally dreams gave way to darkness, a place in which his mind could rest because it was exhausted with conjuring fantasies from the people around him. If he worked enough in class, he could quiet his mind enough to sleep. If he excelled enough in his walls and his practice, there wasn't anything left to ooze between the cracks to trouble him.

No, no; someone else's nightmares were bleeding in.

They woke him with a startled whimper, hands coming down to cover the front of his boxers, fear making his voice small. His normal bunkmate was gone for the week, off visiting family that lived just an hour away. It cost money to have visits like that, money his own father didn't have. In truth, he hadn't seen him for years. Will stared, eyes wide and startled in the blackness of the dorm room, and another whimper managed to escape.

On the other side of the wall, he heard the muffled sounds of someone crying.

The walls in the dormitories weren't entirely thick; government funding wasn't going to be poured into ensuring that each room was separate and distinct from another. Will had woken before to the sound of sex, the sound of arguments and the sounds of an existential crisis unfolding from three rooms away. This, though; this reached deep inside of him, unfurled a flower of fear that he'd never been aware that he had, something that blossomed petals that wept unease and paranoia until he found himself with his back to the wall, arms wrapped tight around himself.

His walls were down. The other boy was bleeding in.

"Are…you alright?" he asked. His voice shook, weak, and he gritted his teeth. The crying warbled to a stop, sniffles punctuated by ragged breathing.

"Yeah."

"Were you having a nightmare?"

There was no answer to that, and Will pressed his ear to the wall, straining to catch a sound. Aware now that he'd been caught, the boy seemed to hold his breath, unable to let the slightest sound escape.

"Are you new here?"

No answer to that, either. The urge to cover himself, to protect his genitalia was near-overwhelming when he took in a breath, and he pulled his knees taut to his chest as a tremor

worked its way through.

"No one is going to hurt you here," he said through the wall. "I promise."

There was another muffled sob, likely exhaled into the pillow.

He wasn't supposed to use his gifts for anything but school and training –the urge to do so gave him a stab of shame, that he was going to get caught and put in detention. When another sob made its way through the paper walls, though, he cringed into the sensations that washed over him like a wave, and he closed his eyes, reaching out past his walls to find the mind whose dreams were crashing all around them.

Fear. God, there was so much fear.

Will clapped his hands over his ears like he could deafen the sounds of sobbing that echoed inside of his mind. It was near-overwhelming as he felt for the Dreamer whose dreams had fallen away from him. It wasn't hard to find the darkness that spread, a tar-like ichor whose thickness were fast enveloping the boy that cried and fought to be free. As his walls lay flat around him, he saw within his mind's eye the struggle, the fear as someone reached, reached, reached and god why did loving her hurt so much?

Will knelt down beside the pit of tar and reached out, pressing his palms to it. It stank of abuse, of years of pain and love intertwining into an ooze that was unrecognizable. Hands clawed their way from it, even as the boy drowning within took a gulp and drowned.

He Dreamed of steps, stairs that rose from the pit and lifted the boy from it with slow, easy assurance. He imagined boards cross-hatching over the pit so that no one could fall into it, barriers that isolated and locked away the nightmares that made him fear what the glint of scissors looked like in the muted moonlight. As the boy was lifted up, Will hurried up the steps and Dreamt railings, a protection so that no one would fall.

The crying boy vomited sludge onto the marble floor, viscera hanging from trembling lips.

Will could Dream that away, too.

They didn't speak for awhile, kneeling as they were in his fears and his painful memories. Will took hold of his shoulders, thinking on the calming things of sunlight on bright summer days and Full Harvest moons during autumn.

He felt a trickle of calm, of comfort as he imagined a full moon above them, restoring them and invigorating them. The image above was fixating for the boy, and he gaped up at it with glazed, wild eyes. His breaths heaved, mouth gaping. His cleft palate somehow made it look wider. Will Dreamed away the bile that they sat in. He Dreamed them eons away from the pit below.

In their shared dream, he wrapped his arms around him and imagined them safe, protected from harm and fury alike. He imagined their peace, a serenity as all was made to

fall quiet, calm in the silence. The boy didn't hug him back, but he didn't push him away, either. After a few moments passed, he let go.

"They're just dreams," Will assured him, thinking of his nightmares. "They can't hurt you."

"The best dreams can," the boy murmured. His voice was ragged from his crying. "The best Dreamers know how to make the dreams so real they hurt."

"Did that happen to you?" Will couldn't help but ask. "Did someone Dream the pain?"

"Yes."

"Are they still here?" Will wondered. He stomped down his own trickle of fear.

"No," the boy assured him, and wide eyes looked from the moon in order to pierce Will with his glazed stare. "No. I Dreamed that they died, then they did."

Will was so startled by that admission that he was back in his room with his walls up around him before he could think to try and understand further, to confirm whether or not that's what he actually means when he said that he dreamt their death.

His eyes, honest and forgiving, had pierced through Will, branded him with something.

"Are you still there?" the boy asked softly through the wall.

"Yeah."

"…Good," he said, and Will heard the creak of the mattress, a soft thud as the boy leaned against the wall between them and rested his head against it. "Good."

Will had nothing to say to that. He thought to ask further, but the admission given in of itself was so staggering, so personal that to beg for more felt sordid. His guilt churned, but he set it aside.

"Thank you," the boy murmured into the space between them, so quiet he barely caught it.

Will turned his head, ear pressed to the wall, and they slept like that for the rest of the night.

The next morning, he went to the dorm room next to his, but there was no one there. He thought to maybe tell his teachers or the agents about the boy with the dreams and the scissors, but he didn't want to concern anyone. It was clear he'd come from a place where people weaponized their gifts and used them against innocents –one of the Academy's worst fears about the cruelty that empaths could have if they're not careful. If he was new, he would learn how to control himself, how to overcome his traumas.

When asked if he'd had a pleasant night's sleep, Will said yes. Yes, he did.

-

Dolarhyde's file is thick.

Will turns over early pages, his Marine Corp background before he went into the FBI. His tumultuous past regarding the constant shift between grandmother, mother, foster care, grandmother, then foster care again is jarring in the midst of medals, awards, and ribbons for his hard work and service in the military. His walls were strong, a Staff Sergeant noted in a report.

He found the intel that no one else could.

His progress through the FBI is the smoothest Will has ever seen –no hiccups, no lapses in behavior or in his abilities. He's quiet, compliant, and willing to work.

After, Purnell snaps him up, and that's when things become interesting.

His intel is thorough –he caught the potential RA before the EBAU had to step in. If you keep him focused, he knows what he's doing.

"Focused," Will murmurs, and he studies the date. Years prior. When everything tasted sweet and full of hope, full of promise for this job where he could utilize his skills and keep the public safe.

Six-month evaluation clean, mentions of his childhood but nothing concrete and clear. Just as close-lipped about it as he was at the academy.

There, a small print out contains his admission to the academy as a teen, his quiet mannerisms as he refused to discuss just what he'd come from that made him wake in the night with a wet bed and terrors.

He missed intel on the Keller case, expressed regret. Mentions of Graham being able to find them before people were hurt. Requested to speak with Graham about the mannerisms of the RA when he was brought in –request denied.

Will frowned over that, his wanting to speak to him about Keller –an E-1 that was planning on setting off a bomb at the Pentagon.

Six month evaluation clean.

Six month evaluation clean.

Six month evaluation clean.

He skims through that, looking for any other mention of his name or anything remotely suspicious. It isn't until early 2017 that he finds something of note, something that makes him pause with his breath bubbling in the back of his throat.

Request to see therapist about loss of time.

Will rereads that several times, his breath catching. Loss of time. Time lapsing, slipping through fingers, falling to the floor where he picks it up and can't recall quite where he left off.

He said he felt that time was slipping out of his hands, Reba had said.

Psychiatric Evaluation: Francis Dolarhyde

June 6th, 2017

Doctor: Hawthorne

Patient exhibits lapses of time, waking in his bed with no memory of leaving work. Lack of spacial awareness at times, prone to quiet moments of reflection rather than speaking. Fear of doing job poorly, feelings of inadequacy. When speaking a hand lifts to cover the mouth.

He's becoming suspicious. He dreams of something called a Red Dragon.

Will pauses over that, studying the capitalization of it. There's a tab at the top of the page, followed by another tab of the same yellow color farther back. He turns to that page, intrigued.

Red Dragon:

Agent Yan –neutralized

Agent Mathers –neutralized

Agent Thompson –neutralized

Agent Nyong –neutralized

Agent Smith –neutralized

Agent King –detained

Beside Agent King's name, there is a note that someone put, almost as an afterthought: *Was able to evade Red Dragon and managed to reach out to police department to aid. Brought in by EBAU, currently residing at BSHCI.*

The word 'neutralized' resonates with him, as it's a specific way of referring to a potential threat. The difference between neutralized and detained is a gaping chasm, one referring to someone being apprehended versus someone becoming something neither positive nor negative –neutral.

Dead.

Will only vaguely recalls these agents names, as they were not people he hunted down but people Dolarhyde watched –Red Dragon neutralized? People within the FBI or other government positions, people that were observed and found wanting.

Agent Hobbs –neutralized via Agent Graham, E-3 –EBAU

He goes to that tab at the mention of Hobbs, his spit turning rusty at the confirmation that neutralize means to end, to finish.

Agent Hobbs observed. At the abduction of Gertrude, the first victim, Red Dragon was to neutralize after report. Instead, allowed RA to escape with victim. Case moved from EI to EBAU under Director Crawford and Graham –E-3.

Six month evaluation clean.

Clean? With a confirmed loss of time, he was still found somehow clean? Will turns back to the pages referring to Dr. Hawthorne's reports on Agent Dolarhyde, moving on to the next session that was requested by Francis.

Paranoia, questions regarding whether or not he watches or if he is the one watched. When asked on the particulars regarding the Hobbs investigation, an expression of fear that if he does not catch the next one fast enough, he will be neutralized. Agent Dolarhyde produced a notebook from cover to cover depicting every event and action that he can recall, as well as the time lapses in between where time was lost. Requests hypnosis, or anti-psychotics.

There is a note attached to that, written in what Will recognizes as Purnell's handwriting:

Have Mr. Perkins release the proper medication.

Agent Graham –observed

He stills at his name, fingers passing over it so that he can better study and understand. He follows those tabs to Dolarhyde's observations, written in a perfect and elegant penmanship.

Evening: Dogs, dinner, reading, tinkering, sleep. Clockwork.

Morning: Breakfast, dogs, shower, dogs, work.

Work: Focused. Goes about business with a sense of urgency. Purposeful.

Social: Non-existent.

Mind: Cracked but resilient. Six month evaluation prior to Hobbs clean. Cracks began after Hobbs case began, attributed to pressure and matter of work. Request for lower hours or lighter load.

Mind: Cracks. Sometimes he dreams that his daughter will leave.

Target displays a quiet contemplation and pain after death of Hobbs. Request rest rather than counseling. He is tired. So tired.

Time lost. Paperwork was filed on man I hadn't reported on. Suggest paid leave for Graham before returning. Cracked but still good.

These pills aren't working.

Beside that, there is a stamp with a spongy and speckled 'Request Denied' beside Will's requested yet unrequested paid time off. Dolarhyde had requested that he had time to rest before he returned to work? Why hadn't Jack suggested it to Will? He turns another page, heart pounding.

Directive filed to retire Graham after next six month evaluation –Director Purnell

There is another note, and he flips the pages to a blue tab. Written in Dolarhyde's careful hand, there is a letter.

Director Purnell,

I write this because there are people filed under my observation list that I see have been neutralized. When I looked into the matter of Agent Mathers, I'd documented that he should be retired. Public record displays him as such, but private documents when I was filing my work show him as otherwise. Are my observations being trumped by something that I'm unaware of?

I'm still experiencing time lapses. This medication isn't working. I'd like to request either vacation or sick leave until I can reassemble myself.

-Agent Dolarhyde

Director Purnell,

Someone attempted to neutralize me last night.

I don't recall the situation in its entirety. I recall writing 'I am being watched,' but the next thing that I recall is waking up to blood on my hands and one of <u>your</u> men in my trunk. I have been trying to get help for my time lapses, but when I was attempting to research just what was happening to the targets that I filed under 'retired' I found a separate file that you have me under.

Red Dragon? Is that who you refer to when I cannot find myself?

He killed your man, Director Purnell. Whatever you've been manifesting and encouraging while I tried to fix it, he is much displeased with what you've done. In my dreams, he comes into my head and whispers that I should kill you.

I think I'll let him.

-Agent Dolarhyde

Will rereads those letters once, twice; on the third time, he leans back and lets out a slow, pained breath, tugging the gloves from his hands because he knows, he *knows* and it's suddenly making so much sense as to why Francis Dolarhyde was placing mirrors in the eyes of these people –

He just wanted someone to *see*.

Can you see?

He grasps the paper with his bare hands, his breath catching as he's hit with a shock of fury, a shock of betrayal, and he's falling into the memory before he can quite prepare himself, before he can peek through the windows like Abigail begged him to.

The man is silent.

I pace, steps graceful and lithe, although my hands clench so tightly I can scarce contain them. I both am and am not, both the victim and the aggressor. I snarl, smoke billowing from nostrils like the Dragon, powerful and all things destruction. In my Dreams, I see the smoke and know that it is true.

"She thinks to end me?" I hiss, and I round upon the man. He is glued to the chair. To remove him would be agony for him, and the thought brings me joy, dark and all-encompassing as it burns through my skin, pushing farther with each beat of my heart. "She would end me when I have quieted those that would disobey?"

"Agent Dolarhyde, you have exhibited RA tendencies. Director Purnell is merely-"

"I KILLED FOR HER," I roar, and I'm upon him, knees digging into his thighs. Spit flies from my mouth, and he cringes against the sound around him.

"You killed for yourself. She merely encouraged it," the man manages.

"She sends a neurotypical to end <u>me</u>? After all that I have done?" I pace again, and I imagine my tail, sleek and long and powerful trailing after me. It is beautiful, scaled and deadly; everything that I am and could <u>be</u>.

"You're a danger to your own organization, Agent-"

"Have you seen the power of an empath before?" I interrupt, and I turn about, staring at him. His voice withers, his eyes widening. "Surely you have not, try as your kind does to stifle us. We who struggle beneath the boot of your fears, taught that our gifts are to be despised, loathed. You have grown up in a world where we are whispers, servants to the government that would break us.

"Francis believes that to retire, we allow them to go to their homes and their pensions and their happy ending. You and I know the truth; a dead empath is a neutralized threat. So comfortable were you all, banking on my compliance because I was allowed to shed blood

and Make; to cross me is to fail. You will tremble in my power, for do you not see that only through your Change can I fully Become?"

"Agent-"

"Do you not wish to see the might of an empath that knows their worth?" I ask. I do not wait for an answer though, moot as it is. I will show him. "I have seen it. I am that power. That fury. You will tremble before me, knees to the ground as you quiver and beg, prostrating yourself before your God. I will show you."

I will show them all.

I am grabbing his face before he can respond, before he can process just what is going to happen to him. Minds like his are weak, vulnerable to my power and capability, and I'm inside of his mind before he can think to defend himself, his eyes my own as I delve deep, deep, deep into the waterfall of thoughts, fears, and dreams.

Oh, god; the dreams.

I Create them, sick as they are. Rivers of blood that he drowns in, where he wakes trembling and paralyzed as a crone leers over him to consume –his fears are there, each and everyone, and as I crash through his psyche I Dream them all against him, breaking what paltry resistances exist because so foolish were they do bank so much on our fear of our own power that they never thought to try and control their own.

The walls do not come for me. To consume them, I Become them, and as I step away, I carry his fears as my own. He is comatose, awake but never again to Be, unaware and never again to Live.

Which is just as well, Director Purnell, as you will learn when you force a Feeler to glean from this paper this scene: he won't live long enough to truly suffer that fate.

I'm coming for you. You and every other that dared to cross Francis and The Great Red Dragon.

Will is only able to come back to himself because of the sharp, piercing ring of the phone back in reality. He drops the paper and has to rub his palms into his jeans, shaking, and once he has sufficiently wiped them down he puts his gloves back on. He'll need to wash his hands soon.

He's sweating, and he wipes at his hairline as the phone rings once more and Reba answers it, voice hushed as she tries to let him keep to his work.

His work. Dolarhyde.

"No…no, no one is in here," Reba says, politely confused. "You know that I work well alone."

He's running out of time. Will hears the mild evasion in her voice, and he shoves Dolarhyde's file aside so that he can look at his own, his heart beating both too slow and far

too fast as it struggles to be both Dolarhyde and him, both excited and utterly, utterly afraid. He licks his lips, unable to quite remove the taste of what someone else's mouth feels like when he's ripping it off of their face. The pride. The joy.

God, the joy.

"No, Mr. D hasn't been here for work in…well, I'd say a little over a month?" There is a laugh. "Why are you asking all of these questions?"

His file is much thinner, and when he opens it, there is a pointed, pained silence as Reba falls quiet and his ears begin to roar.

The first page, written in a familiar, precise handwriting, is all that Will needs to fully understand just what he's going up against. He wonders what he'll take away from it, should he press his fingers to these words instead:

They know.

"I see. Well, I'll keep a look out." There's another laugh. "Yes, okay. Thank you."

There is a click as Reba hangs up, and Will turns the page in the file, palms sweaty as he stares at a blank page, then another blank page, then another. Dolarhyde had somehow gotten to his files.

They knew.

"Agent Graham?" Reba prompts tentatively. He looks up, the wavering green of the lenses giving her an ethereal look as she gazes in his direction, mouth pursed with unsaid words.

"Yes?" he asks hoarsely. He clears his throat –it sounded far too much like Dolarhyde.

"The front desk men…they say there are some agents looking around the place." She shifts, hesitating with her next words. "Are you…are you in some kind of trouble? Is everything alright?"

"They know," he says, and it only takes a moment for Reba to catch on. Her face seems to fall in on itself, and she's sinking into the chair next to her so that she can collect herself, hands pressed to lips that no doubt wish to cry.

"What are you going to do?" she asks, muffled. "For him? For…for you?"

It's a good question, and he packs up the files, tucking them into his bag. There aren't a lot of options for him at this moment, stomach close to mutiny and lips savoring the taste of another person's blood. One thing is for certain, though:

Despite what all has happened, Dolarhyde is innocent.

Will is innocent.

That certainly didn’t mean they were safe, though.

Can you see?

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my patrons: Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! <3

And thank you to all of your continued support for this work! With back to school/fall rush at work, I'm glad that I still have time for writing. :)

When Silence Ensnares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13:

He finds the first man searching the bathroom stalls.

Will isn't quite sure what he's going to do until he sees the gun drawn, subtle but still present in the man's right hand. It lingers just at his side, and when the man turns away from the stall and comes face to face with Will, he reaches up with ungloved hands and claps them over the agent's ears, staring deep into his eyes.

Falling in. Forever, Will would find himself falling in.

Neutralize, cover, recover, report, neutralize, cover –

No, no, no!

There is the sensation of resistance, but there is enough of Dolarhyde still swimming in Will's veins that it's paltry at best. He sweeps it aside with the sensation of fear, of running and running and running and *there is no escape, Agent Jackson.*

"P-please," the man manages to stutter, and his eyes roll into the back of his head.

"Forget me," Will urges quietly, and his voice isn't quite his own. "Forget me. You were never here. You were never here, and you know nothing of Will Graham."

My family, god, my family,

No, no! No, if he knows my family, he'll kill them, he'll put mirrors over them, too – no, no, no, no…

"Forget me and I won't harm your family," Will urges, and he imagines hands clawing into the man's mind, swiping away any trace. It feels forceful, dirty, and when the man slumps against him, unconscious, Will eases him onto the toilet and lets his head loll to the side to rest against the partition.

"Forget," he says again, and it's as much a genuine plea as a demand.

He takes the gun from him and disassembles it, shoving the pieces into his pack. The suppressor on the end confirms what the man had come there to do.

He feels dirty leaving him there but does it anyway, frantically tugging his gloves on before he starts crying over the potential loss of his family that in reality doesn't exist.

The second agent he does not find, but that's alright. He's in a taxi headed towards Wolf Trap before he knows quite what he's going to do –run? Was he considered an RA now, or was he merely someone under investigation, someone they weren't quite finished with yet, so they would keep him around?

The files burn and turn his bag to ash. He holds it tightly to his chest and imagines what was inside of his own that was so abhorrent Dolarhyde didn't want him to see.

"Everything okay?" the man driving the taxi asks congenially. He glances up in the rearview mirror to give Will a brief smile.

Will shakily readjusts his glasses and manages a nod.

"I think I'm coming down with something. Flu, maybe just a cold…something."

"It's that time of season," the man says, accepting his excuse for the tremors and shifty eyes. "Half the team is down for the count on account of it. Colds, mostly."

Will nods and looks out of the window where the sky is grey, bleak and uninviting. Cold.

"It'll snow soon," the man continues when Will says nothing more. "Snow…it'll be a bitch to drive through."

"Do you have winter tires?" Will asks.

"Oh yeah, big time," the man promises. "I take good care of this here car."

He pats the leather arm rest beside him, and Will manages an agreeable smile, although it can't stay. His thoughts are with Dolarhyde, with a man who knew from the core of his heart that something was wrong but had no way to fix it.

The smell of betrayal that Will found at the crime scenes make so much more sense, now that he knows just what Dolarhyde had been begging these men to do.

He just wanted someone to *see*.

"Up to the house?" the man asks.

Will looks up from the faded spot of material near the knee of his slacks, and he shakes his head. "No, no…just here is fine. By the mailbox."

He fishes out cash and passes it over. On seeing his gloves, the man lets out a disturbed noise.

"Christ, if you were cold, you could have asked for heat!" He laughs and looks to Will, eyes bright. "I'd have turned the heat on for you!"

Will manages something much like a grimace and he shakes his head, climbing out from the car.

“It’s fine,” he assures the man. “I didn’t want to spread germs.”

The man is still laughing and shaking his head, even as he pulls away.

Will then heads deep into the forest to take the long way around to the house.

It’s a brisk walk, and it helps with the pounding in his head that urges him to run and run and run and run. He forces himself to keep the steady and even pace of a person that knows where they’re going and what they’re going to do once they get there –he doesn’t, but he can’t afford to panic now. He thinks of Dolarhyde who has been calm despite the fracturing of his mind. He thinks of the man he’d just left unconscious in a bathroom stall. He’s taken enough steps that he can’t afford to panic. He has to *act*.

Just what he’s supposed to do, though, Will isn’t sure.

He comes up on the back of the house, and when he steps onto the property he is suddenly aware that he’s not alone. Will’s arms tingle, and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, so much so that he lets out a quiet hiss of breath and sets his bag down in one of the browning and sleeping bushes nearby. He slinks through the grass, then presses himself to the side of the house where he slides with utmost care, careful of the exposed skin on his face and neck. He feels the sensation of birds in flight, of a bug trundling along. When he reaches the edge, he peeks around the corner.

Hannibal Lecter stands on the porch, looking mildly perplexed.

He’s dressed far more to the cold than Will is. Fall is bitter in Wolf Trap, out in the open forest with nothing to warm it. His scarf is snug, and the hat on his head looks to be wool-lined and soft. Will watches him as he paces along the porch just long enough to turn about so that he can once more knock on the door with two firm, solid thuds.

“Dr. Lecter?”

He’s speaking without entirely intending to, stepping around the side of the house before his mind can quite decide if that’s a good move to make. Hannibal turns, and he smiles politely, albeit confused as he takes in Will’s pink cheeks and the faint sheen of sweat he no doubt has at his hairline. It’d been a brisk pace through the forest, after all.

“Agent Graham,” he greets, and he steps off of the porch to shake Will’s gloved hand. “I called your cell phone, but you must have been out of service.”

“…Fishing,” Will explains, and he gestures back towards the woods.

“Is the fishing particularly good at this time of year?”

“Yes…if you know the right bait.”

Dr. Lecter would be the perfect bait, if they knew how to use him. Had the FBI already called him? The EBAU? Purnell? Will studies his amiable countenance –as ungiving and uninformative as every other time he’s looked at him to try and see. He thinks of the way

that he'd written 'smile' though –pleasantly surprised and warm. Will sucks in a breath, hollowing out his cheeks, before he exhales raggedly and gestures off towards the door.

"…Come on in," he says, and he's leading Hannibal into the house before he can change his mind.

Hannibal is quiet, and the dogs greet him as warmly as they do Will. Their snuffling and whuffing noses prod and poke for treats that the good doctor cannot give, and Will feeds them, his gloves still firmly on.

"Is this a bad time?" Hannibal asks.

"No, why?"

"You were fishing but returned with no equipment, and although I am no expert on what one wears for the task, you're dressed for office work rather than legwork." Rather than sounding amused at his deductions, Hannibal sounds grave. "Are you alright?"

Will opens his mouth to reply with something inane and rather circular, but at the sound of wheels on gravel, his throat tightens and he loses all ability to speak. He glances from Hannibal to the door, then strides down the hall towards the master bedroom to get a better angle of the driveway without being seen because if he's seen, then they'll know, they'll know, they'll *know*.

Hannibal's car is out in the driveway, though; they'll know, no matter what.

They know.

"Agent Graham-"

"Why are you here?" Will demands, and he peeks through the window and watches an agent get out of a sleek, non-descript car. It's their purposefully common-looking clothing that tips him off, and he glances back to Hannibal with a scowl. "Why did you come here?"

Hannibal pauses, guarded. Whatever he sees on Will's face, he doesn't quite like. "I thought to finally return your key to you, but if this is a bad time, I-"

Will doesn't wait for him to give options in regards to timing and the illness of it. He grabs Hannibal by his lapels and shoves him into the wardrobe, climbing in after him and shutting the doors behind them. It's cramped, and in the tight space he is more than aware of every inch of Hannibal that is pressed against him, the cologne that he wears with the most careful of application. Their breathing intermingles, and when Will turns his head from the now secure doors, they are almost nose-to-nose.

"Will, what is happening?" Hannibal murmurs, and it sounds entirely too calm. Despite being roughly handled, he doesn't fight back and for that Will is eternally grateful.

"Shh," Will urges, and his ears strain to catch the slightest of sounds.

Just down the hall, he hears the muted click of the latch on the door catching. Someone else is in the house. His dogs let out wild, whooping barks that are slowly quieted as the man –hopefully –merely placates them with petting rather than a blade or a silenced gun.

"Will-"

"Please, Hannibal," he hisses, and he dips his head to press it into the curve of his shoulder, willing him to *understand*. "Please…be quiet."

Hannibal's heartbeat is remarkably calm against his cheek. In contrast, his own thunders in his ears, hollow and frantic and terrified. Alone, he is sure that he can slip away, lose his tail in the woods back behind his house before he backtracks and hits the road with his truck. With someone else, though, someone not necessarily akin to violence, he isn't as confident that he can get away and ensure that no one gets hurt.

His short, unsteady breathing is halted when Hannibal shifts and wraps his arms around him, pulling him against his chest.

No part of his skin touches Hannibal's; rather than finding himself sinking into the cells of another person, Will is instead bombarded with a sense of security, the wool of Hannibal's coat scratchy against his cheek, the spread of his palm flat against his back. He can't think of the last time he's ever been hugged -surely it was Molly so long ago because no one else would have ever had the need -and rather than tensing and fighting against it, he's flooded with a sensation of sinking into it, a need that twists in his gut and spreads with every heartbeat.

Will shifts and slides his arms around him, clinging to him tightly as he burrows his nose into the collar of his shirt and tries to *breathe*. It's intimate like this, in the dark with only the two of them and the silent fear. In the dark he can't *see*, but in the dark he is able to feel, and the fact that he can only feel his own heart beating and his own emotions untangling and unfurling inside is a marvelous sort of thing, heady when coupled with death that lurks just outside of his door.

If the man with the purposefully too-normal outfit is here to kill him, this may just be a decent sort of way to die, Will thinks.

Hannibal's hand passes along the back of his head, through his curls to glide along his back. Will closes his eyes tight when he hears the squeak of an unhappy floorboard, the whisper of a coat brushing against the drywall in the hall. He tries to match his breathing to Hannibal's to still his heart that screams just loud enough he fears it will give them away. When the door to the bedroom creaks open, he stops breathing entirely.

Hannibal's hands, blessedly gloved, cradle his cheeks and lift his face. In the shadows and darkness of the wardrobe, he can't see details, but he can trace the curve of his face with his eyes, the dips of his cheeks that darken where they sink in ever-so-slightly. He holds his breath as he senses the man moving about the room, searching, and he stares at the space he knows Hannibal's eyes would be, if he could only see.

Ten seconds pass; then twenty. Hannibal's thumbs brush along his cheeks, and as the man departs, Will exhales slowly and leans into him, trembling. He can feel Hannibal's breath catching in his throat, and he thinks of the things he'd felt when he dared to put his fingers to the pages of his patient notes. Although intimate for Will, he's certain that it's grossly intimate for Hannibal, too.

There is the sound a few minutes later of a car starting and working its way down the gravel drive, and it is only then that Will is able to relax.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will lets go of him, flexing fingers cramped from holding on so tightly. "What's going on?"

"…I need your help, Dr. Lecter," Will replies, and he despises how his voice cracks. "…I really need your help."

-

They make their way to Hannibal's home, but only after Will has done a roundabout check of the property to ensure that no one else is snooping about. As an afterthought, he skims over the doorway leading from the kitchen and finds the bug, crushing it under his foot.

"How did you know?" Hannibal asks him, poised in the doorway of the house.

"It covers all main entrances and exits," Will replies, and he locks the dogs in when they go.

In the car, Hannibal glances over at him several times. Will tries to unstick the words from his throat, pressed low in the passenger seat, but they refuse to untangle so that he can make sense of them. He swallows spit down several times, and he fiddles with a loose thread on the arm of his suitcoat.

Somewhere along the way, Hannibal takes his hand at a red light. They both wear gloves, and Will stares at his black gloves in contrast to Hannibal's doeskin pair, thin enough to be useful but warm enough to stave off the cold.

He doesn't remove his hand.

The house is nice; something suited to Hannibal Lecter's eclectic and grand nature. White shutters stand in stark contrast to granite stonework, and the wrought-iron gate at the front is key-coded. Will follow him in, head ducked and eyes searching for any sign of a tail.

He wonders how the man in the bathroom stall is doing.

The fireplace is fired up once he's led to the study, and Will is deposited in front of it without resistance. He stands there, staring at the colors that curl and snap around one another, and he soaks in the warmth as Hannibal busies himself with mindless organizing and tidying. His study is much like his office –warm colors mixed with harsh corners and

furniture. Tossed on one of the leather chairs, Will's bag holds a thousand secrets and a thousand lies. He clears his throat and gags a little at the thought.

"In that bag is my career," Will says at length. The soft, muffled noise of tidying stills.

"Did you look at your file?"

"I would have, had Agent Dolarhyde not taken the pages out."

"You have Agent Dolarhyde's file, then."

"Yes."

Silence, and Will slowly turns from the fire in order to gauge Hannibal's reaction. He's calm in the face of such an admission, as though this were any other conversation in his office.

"What did you learn?" he asks, and he sits down in the chair across from Will's bag. It's not like the office with two chairs facing off from one another, but instead angled close together with an end table between them.

"Were you aware of much of the empath program in the FBI?" Will asks instead.

"I was aware of their capacity for strict and somewhat harsh protocol, but that is something I learned by watching you," Hannibal replies. The firelight flickers and casts malevolent shadows on his face, and his eyes remained fixed on Will. "What did you learn?" he repeats.

"Were you aware that the empath program can forcibly retire people before they can become an RA?"

"You'd said as much."

"What did you know about me beforehand, Dr. Lecter?" Will asks. His voice comes out as hard and unyielding as stone. "What did they tell you?"

"I was aware that they'd discussed a potential to retire you," Hannibal says. "They said that they didn't want to push you past what you could handle and create an RA, however; they were aware of just how much you love the EBAU and your work, as hard and damaging as it is to you because you like the idea of helping people at its core. It's a pure, kind ideology.

"My job was to determine your mental state to see if it was merely stress or if there was something more. In our conversations, you showed a great deal of stress and mental strain, although there is a resilience to you, Agent Graham, that refuses to be beaten. You rise to every occasion. Your behavior wasn't becoming unstable. You merely showed a need to properly channel your grief and trauma."

"Agent Francis Dolarhyde was also supposed to determine my mental state," Will reveals. "Before you."

“And what did he find?” Hannibal’s eyes flick over to the bag before they drift back to Will, head cocked to the side.

“He said that I just needed a break. That I just needed some time to get my head on right.” Will bares his teeth, and the twisting and gnawing in his gut worsens. “Their words to him, after he informed them that I was still fit to work, was that I was to be retired, despite his observations.”

“They thought otherwise?”

“Do you know that in Dolarhyde’s files, to be retired means to be put down?” Will demands, and he stares into Hannibal’s eyes at the silence that follows, willing the truth to show in his eyes, on the hollows of his cheeks. He can see nothing, though, and *God* for the first time in forever he wished ardently that he could see.

Hannibal stands up, and he crosses the distance between them slowly. When he gets close enough, Will starts to take a step back, but Hannibal stops him by reaching out and taking his hand, stilling his escape. The look that he gives Will sears, burns deep, before he glances down and carefully, skillfully removes his glove from his left hand, setting it on the mantle of the fireplace.

Then he deliberately presses his palm to Will’s.

It’s faint, like the frantic beating from the heart of a wild animal. Small rushes of emotion, ideas, thoughts, and at its core there is a reverent, warm sort of care that wonders at Will’s ability to dream, to Become. Will feels shock, surprise, unease, and a protective, vindicated fury, coupled with a warm glow of affection, something surprising even to its owner.

He stares down at their hands, his own chapped and scarred and ugly, compared to Hannibal’s warm and smooth skin, and he has to swallow down the noise of surprise at the undertones that he picks up, an honest sense of want that burrows deep and springs forth orchids across his eyelids as he blinks.

“I have only wanted to help you, Will,” Hannibal says quietly. “I have been curious, yes, and I have shared certain observations with your boss and the EBAU, as was my job, however; I have only wanted to help you.”

Will shifts his hand and presses his fingertips to Hannibal’s pulse, just at the dip in his wrist. He swallows heavily and nods, dipping his head down to better avoid Hannibal’s eyes.

“I believe you.”

“Then let me help you,” Hannibal urges quietly. “I can’t force you. You have to let me.”

“They’re going to kill me,” Will whispers, and he swallows down a persistent noise of despair. “They’re going to kill me for what I’ve discovered.”

Hannibal lets go of Will's hand and allows him to glove it. He steps back to give him space, and Will swallows down short gulps of air as he looks back to the fire and watches it devour the logs with non-malicious intent.

"Have you weaponized your gifts, Will?"

"No," he snaps too quickly, and he thinks of the man that he quieted into a still, sweet sleep. "I haven't hurt anyone, I just…the EBAU is asking me to hunt an RA that only became an RA because he was lied to. He told them that something was wrong, and their answer to it was to lie to him and then try and kill him. And now that I'm becoming aware of that, they want to kill me."

"What do they gain by killing you rather than correct you?" Hannibal wonders. "You're the only known E-3 that's not institutionalized. You are an asset, not a hindrance to their work."

Will knows this, having ruminated on it during his sleepless nights when tossing and turning gave way to pacing. "They're afraid that if I decide that they don't have my best interests at heart, I'll weaponize my gifts and go off of the grid. They'd rather me dead than an RA."

"Do you think them so heartless?"

Will thinks of Jack staring him in the eyes and forcing himself to lie, and he nods, teeth frantically chewing over his lips, peeling skin.

"Yes."

"Then I'll help you," Hannibal decides, and Will bows his head down in sweet, pained relief.

-

The Feeler is uncomfortable, and so is Jack.

"Nothing?" Jack asks.

"Nothing," the Feeler affirms.

The agent in the stall of Gateway Corp's bathroom sits blankly in the backseat of Jack's car. He watches the man gaze about with child-like wonder, and he wishes in that moment that he could pour himself a stiff, strong drink.

"It's like…he wiped him clean," the Feeler continues, and Jack lets out a grunt, a mix between a groan of annoyance and a whine of unease. "There's no memory, no…sensation. Agent Jackson doesn't even know his name."

"It's Dolarhyde?" Jack asks.

“That’s what it feels like, but it’s…different. I worked with Agent Dolarhyde a few times, Agent Crawford, and this isn’t quite…him. It feels like him, but…”

Agent Gee pauses and tries to find the words to describe it. Jack lets him, and he watches the paramedic track Agent Jackson’s response time with his vision, gaze tracking the back and forth motion of a small flashlight.

“Honestly, I think Agent Graham would know better. You’ve had him tracking Dolarhyde, right, sir? He’d probably gain a better insight to this.”

Jack grunts again and nods, rubbing the furrow between his brows. This shit was getting out of hand. It’d been getting out of hand for awhile now, but this…

“I’ll give him a call,” he says at last, and he smiles at Agent Gee. “Thank you.”

The Feeler gloves his hands and walks away to wait for any other command. In reality, Jack envies him, that he’s so low in rank that he doesn’t have to worry about things like RA’s and tracking and Will Graham of all people…

He calls Director Purnell, and it goes to voicemail. God damn, he’s getting tired of leaving so many voicemails. He makes his way around the few cars that they have parked near the back of the lot, out of sight of cameras.

“Director Purnell, this is Jack. We’re trying to be discreet here, but someone at the film developing agency found Agent Jackson unconscious in a bathroom stall. He’d been tracking Graham, and it looks like Dolarhyde got a hold of him.

“My problem here, Kade, is that last we thought, Dolarhyde was after Slowinski. So that tells me either he’s changing course because Graham was tracking him, leaving Slowinski out of danger, or it wasn’t Dolarhyde that got to Agent Jackson. Your guy doesn’t even know his own name. You hear me, Kade? Jackson can’t even remember his name. Kade. You know your fucking name, don’t you? You guy doesn’t, and you’d sent him after Graham to see what he was doing here.

“So the way I see it, your guy got too close, and it scared the hell out of Graham, and he panicked and wiped him. Are you making my guy so scared he’s weaponizing his gifts? Just what the fuck are you doing behind my back? I’m trying to get a hold of him because I wanted him here for this, and he’s not answering his phone. What the fuck have you done with him? Making him so afraid he’s channeling Dolarhyde just to get away?

“Call me back. Better yet, *Kade*, come by my office. I’ll keep your blank slate of an agent in the lobby until you can get there. Maybe let him watch some Rugrats if they still air that on the TV. Until then, I’m going to clean this up. You’d better pray this was Dolarhyde trying to get Graham and instead got Jackson first, otherwise you’re in some shit. If you pushed Graham into weaponizing his empathy, I’ll have your head.”

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my lovely patrons (and my newest patrons): Frosty Lee, Heather Feather, Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! <3

So sorry for the late update, but my recent promotion adds about 13+ hours per day worked to my schedule that was once used for writing/editing/planning! I'm going to try and get into this new groove and plan out a new schedule so that this continues to be consistent, and I appreciate your patience in the meantime! <3 You guys rock.

When the Music Sounds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14:

The phone rings approximately seven times before Dr. Lecter answers.

“Hello?” There’s a pause as Will paces listlessly across the hand-woven rug with little feeling and emotion behind it. Lecter’s voice carries along after him, and he catches the purposefully casual air to it. “Agent Crawford, hello. No, you’re not disturbing me.”

Dolarhyde’s file sits open on the desk, alongside his own with its blank pages and cryptic warning. Hannibal had read it with the same intensity and focus that he did everything else before setting it aside to think.

“Agent Graham? Yes, he’s here.”

He sets the phone down on the desk, on top of Will’s files and turns it on speaker phone. Will deviates from his swaying steps and walks towards the desk, hesitating by the front of it in order to stare down at the display –to better avoid the expression he supposes is on Hannibal’s face. Better now than never, in truth, for him to warn Jack about Will’s actions.

“I invited him to my home for dinner after our session,” Dr. Lecter explains, and he sits down in his leather chair, folding his hands across his chest. “Is everything alright?”

“Your house?” Jack’s voice is tinny, echoing.

“Yes.”

The line crackles, then goes quiet. Jack lets out an aggravated laugh, then, “You know, he’s surprising me more and more every god damn day.”

Will spares Hannibal a glance, and they share grim smiles.

“I may safely agree, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal replies. “Is he needed for work? We’ve only barely sat down before you called.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. He barely gets out enough, I’ll let him enjoy your fine cooking for a night before I pester him tomorrow.”

Hannibal smiles, and it suits his eyes. “The least we can do.”

“Yes, of course. Good bye, Dr. Lecter.”

“Good evening, Agent Crawford.”

The line goes dead, and silence settles back into the room. Will's pace doesn't cease; rather, it seems to persist with a fixated vengeance until Hannibal clears his throat. It disturbs his stride and focus, and he jolts before looking back to Hannibal with an expression much like the one he'd given when they first met, when Will realized that there was nothing at all normal about this Lecter person, no matter how hard he looked at him.

He thinks back to how close Lecter held him, and it solidifies his suspicions.

"If I feed you, I can't be called a liar."

"I'm not hungry," Will replies.

"Aren't you?"

Will is, but he isn't quite sure how to say it; how he hungers for something not quite tangible, not quite able to be felt. He wonders if it was the hunger that did Hobbs in, not necessarily the fantasies that prompted it.

He looks to the grandfather clock that stands regally against the wall beside darkened cherry wood. It's close to dinner time, and most people kept their meals on a schedule. Most people eat three meals a day and eat them around generally the same time.

Most people, when doing their job, don't stick their nose so far into things that it exposes their neck.

"I don't trust your eating habits," Dr. Lecter decides, and it pulls Will from his thoughts, disjointed as they are. He can feel his walls, now, crumbling. Not large boulders that tumble, crack and smack together, but grains that dust away with the persistent wind. Things are loud, in Will Graham's head. He wonders if Francis Dolarhyde's mind is quiet, or if he feels bombarded by the screaming.

Can you see?

"Is there much you trust about me?" Will asks, humorlessly. He allows himself to be guided down an austere hallway of elegant drapes and refined paintings. He thinks of the hunger he'd felt, bare hands pressed to the pages of Blake's work.

He wonders just what it is that Hannibal Lecter is hungry for.

"I believe that at your core, Agent Graham, you want to help people," he replies, and he flips the lights to his kitchen. "That tells me that at that same core, you have good intentions. I can work with those."

"I can't."

"You can," Hannibal replies with ease.

Will is deposited onto a stool as dinner is prepared 'as quickly and painlessly as possible.' It's vegetarian, and Will tastes nothing in the soup, more basil than tomato and richer in cream than the normal canned version he'd personally buy for about .79 cents each.

It's nice, though. It gives him time to compartmentalize. The flavors won't allow him to dwell on his real problems.

The guest bedroom is accented in bold ocher and gold threading in the tapestries that adorn windows closed against the frosted edging. A couple of hours later, Will sits on the plush blankets and presses gloved palms to the duvet, wondering at the thread count he's about to sleep on. To say that Hannibal Lecter's personal living quarters are lavish is an understatement, and although Will certainly doesn't live in squalor, government wages aren't exactly the lap of luxury.

He thinks of how careful Hannibal was to steer the conversation *away* from Jack Crawford's phone call during and after dinner. He didn't make mention of it, and Will was quite fine to set the situation aside for the evening.

Just enough to rest. God, that was all Dolarhyde wanted for him, wasn't it? He just needed some fucking rest?

He lays down, and he closes his eyes. Behind his eyelids, marked by a gaze seeing yet unseen, he watches small grains of his walls crumble with each gust of worry that bursts against him.

-

When he dreams, he dreams of walls sturdy and strong. Thick layers of cement hold them, carefully weighed and measured, fitted to exact specification. They sit two feet thick, and try as he might, Will can't see the top of them, for all the world they keep stacking higher and higher. The air around him is light, the grass beneath his feet warm. Within his walls is a glade, and a stag moves about it, as at ease with him as he surprisingly is with it.

Where the bricks come from, he can't see, but something about them is familiar to him, a touch as soft as his own and equally yearning. With his back to the stag, he presses fingertips to the stone, then palm, then forehead.

-

Hannibal broaches the topic of their next step at breakfast.

"About an hour ago, Jack Crawford called this morning to give me more information regarding his call yesterday," Hannibal confides, pouring Will a glass of espresso.

The fact that he even *has* an espresso machine isn't lost on Will as something that ordinary neurotypicals don't typically do, but the man also has a bidet in the guest bathroom. Eccentric seems to be his thing.

"What'd he say?"

"He informed me that Dolarhyde attacked one of your fellow agents just this past evening, and when he couldn't get a hold of you, he became concerned. I informed him that

you decided to finish work early yesterday in order to meet me for dinner to discuss something I posted in the journals."

"They know," Will reminds him, quietly. Breakfast is sweet, and he spoons a small helping of pomegranate into his mouth.

"Yes, but it is the power of how *much* they know, Agent Graham. Your six-month evaluation is coming up, according to Dr. Bloom. How are your walls?"

He'd stared at himself in the mirror, earlier in the morning. The only eyes he couldn't seem to see into were Hannibal's, and his own.

"They feel…sturdier."

"I'll take this moment to remind you the importance of stable friendships. Stress isn't always so stressful when you have a strong outlet for your emotions in times of trouble."

"It's not *my* emotions that I generally struggle with," Will retorts dryly, but something stops him from entirely laughing, and he turns his spoon over, studying his oblong face in the back of it. It reminds him of the house of mirrors, and he quickly spins it around once more. "Friendship. Is that what you'd call us? Friends?"

Hannibal is quiet, and Will glances up to his face, studying the curve of his lip as he smiles. It's faint, and Will wonders how easily he sees it, that he is used to looking so intently to find it.

"What would you call it?" Hannibal wonders.

"You're my therapist, but it's a work-mandated therapy. You accompany me in my work, so that counts as both colleague and babysitter." Will ticks them off on his fingers, propping his elbows onto the table. "You watched my dog while I was gone, so that is either a fellow church member, or at the least an acquaintance."

"I have no membership to a church, although I have several Sunday masses under my belt," Hannibal assures him.

"You have met me for coffee a few times outside of therapy or work-related business, so that adds the potential for 'old high school acquaintance'."

"I don't have a pyramid scheme to sell, though."

"And you're currently abetting an empath in committing several felonies, so that's somewhere within an emotional spectrum. Maybe friends, maybe enemies. I think either one illicit enough of an emotional response to count."

Will wouldn't quite say that that sobers Hannibal, but he is contemplative as he polishes off his juice. Will isn't quite sure how to steer away from that topic of conversation, nor is he sure the thoughts running through Dr. Lecter's head. Abetting a felon. A felon that isn't quite known yet as a felon, but a felon none-the-less. He wonders if he'll have a matching black hoodie like Dolarhyde's, soon; if he'll have to go and find his own

chloroform so that he can question mentally unstable empaths within the confines of a musty hotel.

There's something relaxing about the ease of Lecter's house, the rooms and walls that look untouched because out of all the places Will walked through, Hannibal is the only one to live in them. After breakfast, he is left to his devices as Lecter gets ready for work, and he takes his time admiring the paintings on the wall, the instruments in a small parlor adjacent to the study.

He is tempted, if but for a second, to take his gloves off and roam throughout the kitchen, where Hannibal's work, passion, and emotion is most obviously prevalent. He wonders if that would be inappropriate, though; if Hannibal's hardened resolve would crumble in the wake of a nosy empath whose hands touch what was never theirs to own.

He *did* take them off in the guest bedroom, but that was to sleep. Hannibal had ensured no one else's skin had touched that pillow, let alone the covers, and Will had rested surprisingly well despite not having to lay his jacket down to protect the bone arena of his skull. He wonders if he'd ever slept so soundly at the EBAU; if dreams were so tangible within such a public and scrutinized space.

"I'm fond of you," Hannibal finally says in response to Will as he's dropping him off at the FBI HQ. It's a casual statement, but the weight of it sits on Will as the cement walls loom behind him, grey and imposing. Hannibal glances to him, and that same faint smile flickers. No thoughts. No intrusions. Just his words and his smile. "We'll start working on your walls in our next session."

"You're fond of me," Will repeats, and it sounds more like he's clarifying rather than parroting.

"Yes."

They stare at one another. Will swallows, hard, and he tracks the steady pulse in Hannibal's neck, the same steady beat that he'd felt when they were locked within his wardrobe, cheek pressed to wool as a killer lurked just outside. Steady. Dr. Hannibal Lecter, in all things, seems steady.

"Do have a pleasant day, Agent Graham," he says, and he gives enough time for Will to take his cue and step back onto the sidewalk, lest his shoes get run over.

I'm fond of you.

The air is crisp and cold, although the sidewalks are swept clean from snow. Salt clumps in small piles where the automated doors slide open.

I'm fond of you.

"Agent Crawford is waiting for you in his office, Agent Graham," the receptionist, a Dreamer, informs him at the front desk.

I'm fond of you.

"Good morning, sir," a security guard greets by the elevator.

I'm fond of you.

"Jack's on a warpath," Beverly warns him as she passes by him with a purpose, hell-bent on the labs.

I'm fond of you.

"You can head right in, Agent Graham," the EBAU's clerk chirps.

I'm fond of you.

Jack's waiting beside the desk when Will walks in, poised like he's been waiting for this moment since the day before when he called Hannibal.

I'm fond of you.

"Morning, Jack."

I'm fond of you.

"Morning, Will."

I'm fond of you.

Will studies the room, and it's not lost on him that there is another man sitting neat and tidy in the corner, quietly content. It takes another scan of the office for Will to realize just *who* it is that's sitting tucked away, and when he does cold sweat breaks out on his back, a dotting of it just along his forehead, too.

I'm fond of you.

"Morning," he greets Agent Jackson, slowly.

Agent Jackson's expression yesterday when he first came across Will at Gateway Corp. was the resigned look Will no doubt often had when doing a particularly unpleasant part of his job. The second, surprise. The third, fear, blinding and all-consuming. Now, though, his face is pleasantly blank, a slate wiped clean of anything that ever made somebody something. His clothing looks much like someone that'd slept in it, and when Will looks to the space just at the side of Jackson's eyes, he's dismayed to see nothing much at all, like passing by a doll in a toy store with plastic parts and nothing of importance tucked away inside.

Agent Jackson blinks at Will, once. His smile is distantly vague, and when Will looks back to Jack, three things become incredibly obvious at that moment:

First, Agent Jackson is no longer the man Will found in the bathroom at Gateway Corp.

Second, Jack is trying to see whether or not Will is realizing *just that*.

Third, if the EBAU knows that he weaponized his gifts, he's not leaving HQ alive.

"What's wrong with him?" Will asks, and he thinks of Hannibal's words, how they echo and bounce about with wild abandon within mildly sturdy walls. They bounce soft, though. They know the sort of danger he's in.

It is the power of <u>how</u> much they know.

I'm fond of you.

"You think something's wrong?" Jack asks.

Will lets his lip curl, but only a little. "I think that even neurotypicals could see something's wrong with him, Jack."

Jack relents after a moment, but his shoulders are still taut. He circles the desk to come around and stand beside Will, too close for comfort. "Found him at Gateway Corp. Can't see anything on their cameras, but looks like Dolarhyde dropped by for a visit."

"Evidence he wanted to hide?"

"From this guy, or from us?"

Will frowns down at Jackson's stupidly placid face. "Maybe both. Do you…do you want me to see?"

"Do you *want* to see?" Jack asks.

It's the staged look of it, Will decides much later, that determines what he does. Jackson purposefully positioned away from the main portion of the room, Jack close enough to touch but not close enough to *feel*. Jack's office isn't small, yet they're sequestered far enough away from the main angles of the cameras that the look of it isn't quite damning.

Yet.

"Jack, what's going on," Will prompts, softly. "What's wrong."

Jack lets out a slow breath, something speaking of the years between them and all of the work Will's done in his time. The RA's under his belt. The killers crowding his head. The whisper that one day, *maybe one day*, he'll be right alongside them, dead. This time, Will isn't entirely tempted to try and glean secrets from his boss. There's something in him, something persistently needing, that whispers that maybe, *maybe* Jack will give him more than just death.

Maybe.

“Tell me your whereabouts yesterday, and I’ll tell you why I’m worried about it,” Jack says heavily.

Will looks from Jackson to Jack. He fixes his gaze onto the curve of his cheek, where his jaw determined years ago that no matter the expression on his face, Jack would always appear mildly aggressive in nature. It’s a bone he’s being thrown, Jack allowing Will to fill in the gaps first. He doesn’t miss the opportunity, and he doesn’t let it pass him by. He wets his bottom lip, tucks his hands into his pockets.

“Shit, Jack, you know I’m feeling the heat,” he says. “I called Dr. Lecter.”

“You called him?”

Will nods. “Yeah, *I* called him. I wanted to talk about his articles.”

“Bloom says you have a fixation on his articles.”

“I do.”

I’m fond of you.

“So you call him?”

“He invited me to his house, I go, we talk about his articles. He invites me to stay for dinner, and I do. He said you called.”

“You didn’t answer my calls.”

“Phone died. It was charging at Lecter’s, but I hadn’t turned it on yet.” He allows a pause to flutter about, awkward, before he plunges on. “Do you…you don’t think *I* did this, do you? Jack?”

Jack laughs, but its humorless. “I don’t think you did, but you’re the only E-3 not institutionalized, Will. It spooks higher ups when something…well, shit, something like *this* happens. You look at that man, you tell me what you see. Feelers couldn’t get anything off of him, so it’s making Purnell nervous.”

“So it’s a show, then. I’m humoring you,” Will clarifies.

“Humoring the bureau,” Jack replies. His expression is just as humorless as his laugh.

Will isn’t quite sure how to voice it in a way that makes sense, but seeing what’s come of Agent Jackson is terrifying on a personal level. The man doesn’t so much as blink when Will puts bare palms to his temples, and when Will looks into eyes vacant, trusting, and open, there’s something that breaks inside of him, to see just what he’s capable of.

I’m fond of you.

There is nothing. Where thoughts, panicked and frantic in the face of Will’s ambush used to rush, fleeting and wild, there is silence. Walls of memories hold doors laid open, the

feeling like a house newly modeled and ready to sell. The white picket fence isn't peeling. The door is wide open, and there is a sense that no feet have walked through the foyer, no hands that have touched the dry wall and claimed it as their own. Will trembles, touching Jackson's shoulders. He can see inside, but there is nothing to see, and it's like what he imagines the Perkins house to look like, now that someone's had the time to paint over the screams.

He inhales, and he smells Dolarhyde.

It's not the end table that dumps Will unceremoniously onto the chair opposite of Jackson's, but a small ottoman. It hits the back of his calves, and he crumbles onto the cushion with hardly a resistance. He thinks of chloroform pressed to his nose, how everything smelled like gasoline and dread. He thinks of Dolarhyde across from him, gun trained to him yet eyes begging him to just fucking *see*.

"What do you see?" Jack asks after Will has caught his breath.

He feels something bitter, like biting into a bad almond on his tongue as he replies, "Dolarhyde."

Jack bows his head, and there's quiet in the room. Agent Jackson is a blank slate, never-ending, and Will for the first time truly understands what it is to fear the power an E-3 could hold, should they ever decide weaponize it.

I'm fond of you.

Chapter End Notes

Onto the next story to finish! It's been too long since I've dug into this world.

With holidays approaching, please be understanding of updates to come. As those of you that have been around since Magnus Opus can attest, since my promotion I don't have near the amount of time necessary to write as avidly as I did before. With my new boss, I have even less time than that. (Try updating on your break while she's talking to you the entire time about work until you go and hide at the nearby Starbucks HAH).

For those of you just coming on, WELCOME! I try to update once a week, but it seems to be closer to once every other week at this point. Once I have a new job, hopefully that will change, but until then that is how things have to be. :) I appreciate your understanding! I WISH that I could write every single day and post the way that I used to, but adulting, y'know?

Anyway, I'm just so happy to be back here writing this guy. Looking over old chapters, I can see quite a few areas where I need to EDIT like crazy, so until I'm able to do that, bear with the grammar/editing from the previous chapters. I'm going to get my hands dirty ripping up a couple of odd spots. >:)

Hope you enjoy! And welcome to the world of Empaths.

When The Reflection Blinks Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15:

There is a mirror seated just to the side of their normal chairs when Will Graham walks into Dr. Lecter's office.

Will notes it, but he ignores it. Mirrors are beginning to leave a sore spot for him, something sensitive to the touch but difficult to see; a bruise that hadn't yet risen to the surface. He wonders if that's something to confide, but he isn't the first to speak. Hannibal sits across from him after his initial greeting, and it's more than apparent that this isn't to be a regular therapy session. He sits forward with his elbows resting on his knees, his expression intent.

Something about it is warming, but maybe it's that Will kept recalling throughout the day how closely they'd been pressed, hiding in that fucking wardrobe.

I'm fond of you.

Still, though; that hadn't stopped him from pondering, between paperwork and stale sandwich bread at lunch, what he'd do should he ever accidentally do to Dr. Hannibal Lecter what he did to Agent Jackson.

Just Mr. Jackson, now. Honorable retirement with benefits to the grieving family.

"You avoid mirrors," Hannibal begins once Will has stopped adjusting his gloves on his hands and looks up.

"Most empaths do."

"You especially, though. Even when I first saw you at the candy bar machine, you avoided the reflection in the glass. It was curious to me."

"You saw me?"

He's not sure what to think of the small smile that he catches for a brief moment. "Not all-seeing, then."

"No," Will agrees. He isn't sure how to feel that he didn't sense him staring, as he normally would when being studied by neurotypicals.

"What we are going to do today is find what is blocking you from seeing past your eyes the way you are able to with everyone else," Hannibal explains, and it jostles the thought from Will's head. "There is a barrier, and we may be able to pinpoint it in order to eradicate it."

Will looks to the mirror, then back. As Hannibal shifts forward, he finds himself leaning away. “And just like that, I’ll, what,” –he snaps his fingers, much to Hannibal’s amusement -"see inside?”

“And become your very own architect whose walls cannot crumble,” Hannibal finishes, and he stands up in order to retrieve a stool.

He is too close when Will humors him and sits down once more; much like the mirror when he first walked in, he ignores it and stares at his expression. Morose. Subdued. The shadows under his eyes aren’t so much a sign of fatigue as they are a constant presence, something that marks Will Graham as both Will Graham and distinctly exhausted. He’s grown used to the random stubble, as well as the unruly curls. He’s grown used to a lot of things, he thinks, but there’s something about staring into his own eyes and seeing nothing that makes him nervous. What if Empaths really are nothing more than what they can glean from the world around them?

What if the only way Dolarhyde is making it home is in a body bag?

And Will, too?

“Tell me about Agent Jackson,” Hannibal prompts, voice too close.

It doesn’t send him tumbling in –too easy, he supposes, that that would be all it took. Instead, his pupils dilate, and he can almost see his pulse in the mirror pick up in pace at his neck, thumping erratically.

“What about him?” he asks –too raspy. Too obvious that it’s touched a nerve.

“Jack called and warned me that your headspace may be uncertain. You had to look into the mind of a man that’d been wiped of memory, humanity. He lost what made him human.”

“Do the memories make the man?”

“Don’t they?”

“We aren’t the sum of our parts,” Will murmurs, but he isn’t quite sure if he means it. Aren’t they? Aren’t they nothing more than the flesh and blood and bone, coupled with a mind that determines just how well each piece cohesively meshes together? Without his mind, what matter is the parts of Agent Jackson if Agent Jackson is no longer there to utilize them as he normally would?

“Perhaps you are not seeing it broad enough,” Hannibal suggests. “You see him as a singular raft in an ocean, but outside of his mind lie a thousand others that think of him as so much more than the memory itself. In a thousand minds, it’s almost as though he’s lived a thousand lives, if we think of him that way.”

Will thinks of Mrs. Hawthorne, how she exists yet does not exist, equal parts deceased yet remembered and loved by both Dolarhyde and himself. She is still very much alive, and

he sees her when he dreams.

"Memory can't sustain him, though," Will refutes, and he's quiet. "They could fill him to the brim with all the memories in the world, and it wouldn't be enough. He's not really…*him* anymore. If he can't see the memories as his own, they're worthless in his eyes."

"Jack would tell you that this is why they have such a strict hand within empaths' lives, yes?" Then, before Will could answer, "Don't look at me, Will. You have to face the discomfort of looking into your own eyes when you speak."

Will obediently, albeit uncomfortably, looks back to his own gaze in the reflection. It blinks morosely and accusingly. "This is why laws were first put in place, yes. Not every government employee is an empath, but every empath is a government employee. There's too much at risk to the general public if empaths can't exercise control."

"Then, within those specific employments, there are people such as Agent Dolarhyde and yourself: empaths that babysit empaths."

Will doesn't miss the way Hannibal's tone shifts, how his choice in words smart. He also manages to catch the way his own lip curls in the reflection as he replies, "Yes."

"Therefore, people like Agent Dolarhyde and yourself are kept under stricter watch, a closer guard on what you do and who you do it do. For someone like the two of you to weaponize your gifts, it's taken far more seriously than if the postal service worker that delivers my mail everyday decided to manipulate me into tipping him once in awhile."

"Any empath using their gift as a weapon is immediately fired from their position," Will replies, watching the tic just near his eye from lack of sleep. He forces himself to look back to his eyes. "They may even serve permanent jail time, depending on the severity."

"And just like fingerprints, any empath that touches the mind of another leaves something behind?"

"Yes, easily seen by another empath that comes along later." Will licks his lips, then asks, "Is this really going to help me see into my own mind?"

Hannibal smiles slightly. "You could feel distinctly that Agent Dolarhyde is the cause behind Agent Jackson's permanent memory loss? A distinct and specific fingerprint?"

He starts to say yes, of *course* because it was Dolarhyde he tasted when he sucked in a breath, Dolarhyde whose hands had wiped Jackson's slate clean, and Dolarhyde that protected Will when Will, in that moment, wasn't sure how to protect himself.

But it was Will's hands, wasn't it? Will's words and thoughts and *needs*? Will's use of Dolarhyde's imprint on his own mind, brought to the surface only when he realized he was in far over his head?

"I did," he confesses, and there isn't anyone else resting on his lip, whispering the words for him. Will, in this moment, owns just what he did, and staring into his eyes he sees

no guilt, no shame.

No, no, staring into his eyes, Will is forced to see just how little he seems to care, confessing such damning words.

And just like that, he finds himself tumbling in.

-

Everyone's mind holds a different sort of door. Some doors open wide to large fields where flowers are memories and each one plucked removes the memory it bloomed from. Some doors open to castles fiercely guarded, no secrets let loose unless one is tenacious enough –or a trained empath that knows how to slither by. Some doors open to simple houses, others to libraries whose books tell the tales the mind was able to cling to.

Will Graham stares at his shabby little door, shoulder-to-shoulder with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and he lets out a warbling breath of laughter.

"It's ugly," he says, staring at it.

In truth, it is. The space around them is dark, indistinct, and Will Graham stares at his door because despite its dingy, beat-up existence, it is still the door to his mind as his mind sees it. It is his, it is closed, but he's there.

Good God, he's there.

"Those are solid brass fittings," Hannibal notes, although the sound of his voice seems to resonate moreso between Will's ears than flitting inside of them. "Your door is beaten, Agent Graham, but it is still standing. Solid oak, and not a seam between the door and the frame."

Will steps closer to inspect it, and despite the first appearance, beaten and scuffed and aged, he has to agree; the maker of the door made it to last, nothing so beautiful but something so solid it could not fall.

"You have a way of seeing things about me that I would never consider," Will replies, and that odd sensation in his stomach returns, something tugging, hungry. Hannibal Lecter sees him in a way that lingers in his mind long after, imprints that he passes fingers over in wonder.

"That is because you hide many aspects of yourself from view." Before Will can protest, he continues, "which is certainly allowed, even for empaths; despite what you may have heard, you do have a right to privacy."

"So your seeing those things means…what, exactly?"

"I'm just far better at seeing than others are," he replies, and he takes a step closer to the door.

Will follows him, and it's the right thing to do; the closer he gets to the door, the more familiar it is to him, something warm and inviting and *how could you ever say your mind was ugly? Your door, your lock, your key?*

"This is…" his breath halts, and he's terrified because this is real, this is *real*, and he grasps the aged and polished brass knob, twists, and opens the door.

It's the wall.

Tarnished, beaten, aged, a stone wall looms before them, across a field of what Will would have once called Monkshood in their prime. His shoes crush and destroy stalks, turned to ash and rot against a rocky and dry bed of soil. He stares across the barren wasteland of his making, and he can just make out the dust carried off of the beaten stone before them, bits of himself that are falling away.

Wind whistles, howls around them, and Will senses more than feels Hannibal ushering him through a field whose flowers curl in and die, a forest yawning open behind them whose branches are naked and curled to claws. He feels those branches reaching, yearning, scratching at the shirt on his back, hissing his sins for all to hear. Will sucks in a breath, and he sees Garrett Jacob Hobbs in the field, staring. His heart thumps once, twice, and he gags on his tongue, remembers the day, *remembers,* and how could a memory hurt this much?

How could he kill himself and yet find air enough to *breathe*?

"Open the gate, Will," Hannibal urges, and they're not in front of Garrett Jacob Hobbs anymore; they're in front of a portcullis, and Will isn't so much pulling the lever as he's willing himself within, where it seems most safe when his own mind's reduced itself to rubble around him.

And yet, just inside…just inside those walls, Will opens his eyes, and he's in paradise.

The walls whose edges were fading stand tall, proud on the other side. Much like his dream the night before, he can no longer hear the howling from outside, and he can no longer see just where the bricks end and the sky begins. Awed, he can only place his palm to the cool stone and feel it tangibly beneath him, there and yet not there at all, protected within his own mind as he is.

Rich garden beds of monkshood adorn aimless and soothing walkways laden in springy moss and loamy earth. When he can pull himself from the wall that shows nothing of the torment on the other side, he caresses gentle purple and blue petals in earthen pots made from clay. He smells Oleander from a bush in the corner, brushes fingers against mistletoe hanging from an arbor.

On the other side of the arbor is a field leading to a forest, and in that field is the stag from his dream.

"Monkshood goes by many names, and one may find a thousand ways in which to poison someone with it," Hannibal says from behind him. "What is interesting, though, is that

despite the hues, the size, and over two hundred and fifty sub-species of it, you can't aptly find a true description for the scent."

Will tears his gaze away from the stag that grazes among the tall grass and clover in order to look at the monkshood in Hannibal's hand. "You pulled up the root," he notes, staring at the veiny and desperate white shoots. Dark dots of soil cling to them, and he can suddenly smell the satisfaction of tilling the soil in the air.

"Every part of monkshood is toxic, but the root especially," Hannibal replies, as though that explains it.

"Monkshood has no identifiable scent," says Will, and he touches the curved petal that forms the hood. "At least, when I've smelled it, it's not ever held a scent. The root almost smells like radishes."

"In cooking, the taste would be sweet for the barest of seconds, then immediately bitter, following by a burning and numbing sensation."

"Poisoned your fair share of guests with monkshood?" Will asks, and he laughs.

"I thought to ask you, seeing as how that is what *your* mindscape blooms from the soil of your thought," Hannibal says, and he mimics Will's action, stroking the petal that forms the hood. "If my understanding of you is accurate in any way, I believe I know the reason, though."

"I'm open to your psychoanalysis at this time," Will assures him. He looks back to the stag that grazes, aware but uncaring of his scrutiny. He wonders at its regal stance, antlers wide and sharp enough to impale someone upon –

–sharp like the antlers Cassie Boyle had been thrown upon.

"In smaller doses, most poisons are also healers," Hannibal murmurs, sitting on a bench beside the arbor. One leg crossed over the other, he fits well within the safe space, the gentle gardener admiring what he's sown. "You willfully put in an application to work with the EBAU. Knowing the precarious place your mind could be, you put yourself in a position where you would have to use it extensively."

The stag bows his head, bobbing down to snuff up an acorn. Rather than sit, Will watches it move through the field, no cares to the walls around them. Inside of this place, Will can't hear the howling, no Garrett Jacob Hobbs that looms about, leering.

Inside of this place, he is most-assuredly safe.

"At your core, Will, you want to help people."

He looks away from the stag at the sound of his name. He likes how Hannibal says it, soft and knowing. It echoes him from the day before, that belief and affirmation. Maybe, just maybe if someone like Hannibal Lecter says it enough, Will can still believe it: he helps people; he doesn't hunt them.

“You really believe that,” he mutters, and the flitting of a smile across Hannibal’s lips is all the affirmation he needs. He looks back to the stag, and out of the corner of his eye he can spy Hannibal turning the monkshood about in his hands, gentle.

“I do. If there was malice within your intent, we would see it here, in your garden.”

“No offense, but you’re a neurotypical, Dr. Lecter. Couldn’t this be an elaborate trap, something to make you think I want help when all that I honestly want to do is destroy you?” Will asks, bitter.

He blinks, and Hannibal is just before him, mouth open and monkshood petals falling in. Before he can blink again, Will is throwing them to the ground, frantically batting tall grass and fallen leaves out of his way as he attempts to scrape away the remnants of the petals from Dr. Lecter’s tongue, breath heavy and held furious in his lungs. Inside of his mind they’re both solid, real –but was this real? Could it be called real when they were within his mind, within the very spaces Will himself created?

It feels real, at least. Hannibal is still beneath him, and he wipes the last petal from his lip as Will wheezes out a breath above him, throwing the crumpled and abused indigo shades to the breeze that carries across the short distance towards the stag. It lifts its head to sniff at them, wary.

“Do you die in real life if you die in my dreams?” Will hisses to him, and the walls around them shudder. “Do you risk your life just to prove a point to someone like me?”

“Someone like you is precisely the sort of person I’d want to sway,” Hannibal replies lightly. There isn’t a care in the world to show on his face, just something smug in his eyes as he lays very, very still. “Will, an E-3 whose first thought is to risk the walls built sturdily around them in order to save the life of the person in front of them is someone I would bend the very heavens and earth in order to convince of their good deeds and intentions.”

Will is speechless, and he falters just long enough that Hannibal continues,

“An E-3 that can see the dangers of their own power yet wield it with such care that it is an aid rather than a poison…now that is a person to want approval from, wouldn’t you say?”

Will looks to the monkshood planted in aged and cared-for pottery, flowers jaunty in the wind that stirs. He could have used his gifts as weapons, but instead he decided to risk poison for the said of providing an antidote for others.

“And to some degree, Will, I believe you understand that on some subconscious level. This is how your mind toils in its safe space, your palace. This is what you dream of your peace, where you find comfort. Here, you are able to be both a disease and the cure.”

Looking to the stag gives him some bolstering of courage. He admits, the taste bitter like biting into monkshood petals, “I didn’t mean to. I was attempting to make him forget seeing me. I didn’t realize my…my panic, my…fear would take everything else with it.

Dolarhyde got his hands on me after we went to the Hawthorne's house, and it just… snapped, when I saw him. I just grabbed him, and I…"

He thinks of the house of mirrors, his face both oblong and rotund, pinched and awkward.

"You keep thinking of yourself as this tool that channels the thoughts and behaviors of people that you are tasked with tracking down. It's a beautiful sort of torture you put yourself through, but aren't you getting tired of it, Will?"

Will likes hearing the familiarity of his name on Hannibal's tongue. He wonders of Dr. Bloom would approve of conversations like these, or if she would have to report him for an instant evaluation. Given the assassins sent to kill him, it wasn't difficult to imagine what would happen after *that*.

Or, what would happen should he ever accidentally do to Hannibal what he did to Jackson.

Can you see?

"What are you trying to tell me, Hannibal?" He tests out how the name sounds out loud between them. The stag watches them from a distance, and Will feels the *knowing* of it, sure that the stag is just as aware of them as he is of it.

"I'm saying that in order to fix the cracks you saw within the exterior of your walls, you will have to become familiar with weaponizing your gift in order to project into the evaluators' minds what you need them to see in case your walls aren't built in time."

"Why didn't you just say that, then?"

"I thought to ease you into the idea, but that seems foolish now." Hannibal smiles, and the fine lines at his eyes suit him, Will thinks. "On the inside of your mind palace, the walls are thick and sturdy. It's a promising start."

"Do you think of your mental space as a mind palace?" Will asks skeptically. Looking about the rustic stone, there is something vaguely reminiscent of castles and folklore.

"Oh, yes. Mine is a palace I imagine with many doors, and the memories I want to keep are tucked away behind each door. If I need to make room, I do."

Will laughs, not unkind. "You're careful, then, not to let anything fit behind the doors that you don't want."

"I do my best," he replies gravely.

Will is brought back from his mind slowly, like the deep inhale after first drifting off. His eyes are unfocused, and somehow he's tired although he's been sitting still. It isn't until the mirror is safely put away and Will is seated in his normal place that he can speak.

"What's…what's that like?"

Hannibal’s thoughtful gaze is to his notes in the notebook Will had once rifled through. He looks up and closes his pen in the book once he’s finished writing, and he fixes Will with an expression akin to grim victory.

“Small steps. For now, I believe it’s best that I accompany you to your home while you take care of the dogs, and you stay with me tonight. If I remain close to you, they won’t have the opportunity to kill you just yet.”

“And if I’m lucky, I get Jack off of my back and catch the rogue empath that keeps trying to taunt me,” Will agrees with a humorless laugh.

Hannibal guides him out of the office with a hand at the small of his back, and Will lets him.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, every flower in Will's mindscape is poisonous if consumed :)

Thank you so much for thoughtful words and comments! To bring this one back after so long to see people having waited for it makes me so happy and thankful! Have a good Saturday.

With Loose Lips Ships Don't Sink

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16:

Beverly is walking away from his doorstep when Hannibal pulls into the driveway. The dogs are going nuts inside, and Will uses that as the perfect distraction to avoid her bemused expression at seeing him get out of his therapist's car.

The dogs rush about, and Buster frantically sniffs at him, begging treats. Will crouches to rub his belly, and he stares at the toe of Beverly's shoe just at the corner of his eye. Beverly has always been a surefire read, a genuine one. She has something to say, and she's radiating with an energy of something bordering antagonistic.

Will imagines his walls, where they rise high. He can't handle channeling her anger right now. He has his own, something a potent bled of antagonistic and afraid all in one.

"Was wondering where you were."

"I didn't know you knew where I lived."

"Do you know where I work?"

They both smile, and she accepts Buster's affection and excitement, reaching down to scratch behind his ears.

"I'm getting insight into the rogue empath that Jack asked me to look into. He pulled me away for something else, but I'll be back to hunting Dolarhyde soon, promise."

It was a shitty promise, but he wasn't feeling too awful about it.

"Bull shit, you're coming out with me," she replies easily, and she picks Buster up, much to his delight. "We haven't gone out for a beer in awhile."

"Now isn't exactly…"

"Will and I were going to go out to dinner, actually. Would you care to join us, then go to drinks after?" Hannibal cuts in smoothly. His smile is as warm as his tone, and Will barely manages to repress a look of utmost disdain. He really doesn't have time for this shit.

"Where were you thinking of going?"

"I haven't had taken either of you to an excellent Greek restaurant just a on the edge of Baltimore. Are there any allergies I should be aware of?"

There are no allergies to fear, and the plan is set. The dogs make their rounds, and Will apologetically ushers them back into the house, giving them an extra treat each on the way out. They take Hannibal's car, and maybe it's a calculative move on Hannibal's part as much as a political one because now someone is less likely to kill him if they think he has company over for the evening.

Beverly is quiet only through the appetizer. She seems to be observing as much as she is enjoying the ambiance of an artificial waterfall in the corner, as well as the tangy scent of olive oil and vinaigrette. That buzzing energy sits with a cloud around her, and Will imagines her leaning in with aggression, hearing something she's not entirely pleased about.

He blinks away the thought, the Dream. If he looks too closely, he'll fall in, and sometimes falling in is scary when you're not quite sure where you'll land. These days, it's unsettling enough that he can't account for how he'll react once he's inside, either.

Just Mr. Jackson, now.

Will picks at his cloth napkin idly, and Hannibal informs them of the best of the menu, along with some of the recipes he's attempted to replicate. The air hums with socialites' laughter and the clatter of fine china. Live music plays, Beverly hums along. It's the setting to a perfect scene of three friends from wildly varying lifestyles coming together, and if he was in more control of himself and his surroundings, Will would have laughed out loud at it.

"Sometimes, Will, I think it's a shame that you can't eat meat. Some of the flavors Greek cuisine bring out linger in a way that is difficult to mimic in other dishes."

"They have a roast lamb that I'm going to have to devour," Beverly says by way of agreement. Her eyes lighten at something, and she taps the menu pointedly. "This was a good suggestion, Dr. Lecter."

"I'm happy you could come along."

"Well this guy usually makes a point to clam up and avoid social situations, so this is one of the few times I get to have a conversation with the illustrious Will Graham outside of work," Beverly says with a laugh.

It's light, not unkind. Will manages a smile and accepts the wine from the waiter as he returns. The waiter's eyes linger, focus on his gloves still on inside the restaurant. Will tucks his hands under the table and waits for him to leave. While empaths aren't hated within society, they aren't entirely enjoyed, either. He can sense the immediate assumption and judging.

Far different from the taxi driver that supposed him to be cold but far too polite to voice it.

"Have you been waiting for a moment to question him extensively on something?" Hannibal asks.

“What’s on your mind?” Will asks distractedly, looking back to them.

Sometimes, he thinks about how Hannibal had looked, standing so close to him in the house of mirrors. Perhaps he Dreamed it, something his mind created because it wanted to be, and yet; there was something in the way he spoke words that would be treason should Jack Crawford hear them, and here he was ensuring that Will was in a position to be protected. His question now is much the same, and Will swears he can see that same hint of hunger as he studies Beverly with a keen attention to her squared shoulders despite the casual setting.

I’m fond of you.

“I was wondering what your thoughts were on the empath Jack’s having you track on the side.”

Can you see?

“What do you mean?” Will frowns.

“I just want to hear what you have to say,” she says, but that’s not quite how it sounds.

“I don’t think that’s true,” he retorts, and it grants him a laugh.

“You’re going to probably think I’m an ass hole after this,” she warns. “But I like taking things head on.”

“I’ll live,” Will promises, taking a sip of white wine. It is light, buttery on the palate as the server said when he first suggested it. He notes Beverly tracking it, and he forces a smile.

“When you first put your hands in the victim’s chest cavity, afterwards you described this as being some sort of homage to you. You said that the person asked you if you could see.”

He thinks of Slowinski, how his life hangs in the balance of whether or not Dolarhyde can find him. He tastes the bitter burn of monkshood, and it takes another long sip of wine before he can sound perfectly normal.

“It was a disorienting experience, but I recall” he says. Barriers. Compartmentalize. “What about it?”

She takes a sip of her wine –to steady herself, Will notes –and she accepts a plate and an offering of hummus from Hannibal. “The second time, you tell Jack he’s an empath, but you make no mention of this person saying anything specifically. Just that they were weaponizing their gift.”

Will could see where this was going. He busies his hands with his food, and he savors the warmth of the naan in his palms.

“Did he say anything that time? Or did it go from him reaching out to you to nothing at all?”

One thing Will both loves yet loathes is Beverly Katz's tenacity for diving right to the point. Maybe, if Will hadn't yet felt such a distinctive…*need* to protect this person in the moment, odd as it was, he'd tell her the words ringing in his head, nudging, pushing? And yet it would be a disservice, somehow, to tell her how protective, almost endearing it was that in the midst of all of this someone is attempting to save him from himself. From the institution that holds him.

He can't quite say it like that to Jack, though. That's a surefire way to fail his psyche-evaluation. To retirement.

To turning out like Dolarhyde.

"He likely lost interest when I didn't respond. I think Jack was right to pull me. No action led to boredom, so he's escalating," Will says, swiping the bread through the hummus. He won't look at her eyes.

He'd hissed to Lecter that the rogue empath was taunting him. It seemed Hannibal had kept his secret, left it there among the distorted glass and tilting halls.

"Do psychopaths do that? Or rogue empaths, for that matter?" Beverly asks, confused.

"I suppose it's possible," Hannibal admits, cutting in smoothly. "It depends on the ultimate intentions of the empath. Are they attempting to draw Agent Graham out specifically, or are they comfortable so long as they have *someone's* attention?"

"I guess that's what I'm wondering if you gleaned something the second time. I'm confused that it's so…contrasting from the first time they struck."

Will polishes off the rest of the wine and tears into the hummus with a single-minded vengeance. "That, and you had to ensure that if I drank tonight, it wasn't alone."

She snickers rather than blusters, and maybe that's why he likes her, for a neurotypical.

"If he strikes again, get me there asap, and you'll get the reaction in real time so you trust the source," he suggests. "I'm thinking back now, and what I said in the moment would have been the most honest. In the moment, we say what we see, we say what we feel. If that's what I said, that's what I said."

"Thanks for the permission," she replies after a beat, saluting him with her glass. "Now, I'll make up for the interrogation with a round of drinks after dinner. You're always a good sport, Graham."

It's not alcoholism if he drinks with others. Will allows himself to relax.

It'll look good right before the evaluation.

-

He's drunk by the time Hannibal safely returns them to his humble abode. Everything is slippery, falling away, and he thinks of the first time he watched a fish die. How his father hit it, and he'd barfed later, unable to peel the death from his eyes.

"Are you comfortable walking by yourself, Will?" Hannibal asks, and everything's damp to the touch. Will isn't sure if he sounds angry or if he's amused, and gloved hands tuck themselves into pockets. Beverly had gone home in an Uber, promising to pick up her car in the morning. If she felt liquor as much as Will currently did, she was going to regret her life choices in the morning. He would, too, but right now he feels nice. Things feel nice. Damp, but nice. Why damp? He inhales, and the air is wet. He wonders if he's thinking too much about that fucking fish. How it gaped, staring, dying.

"Yes, thanks, Dr. Lecter."

"Please, call me Hannibal."

Will likes the feel of that, how it compresses in his chest and makes his heart constrict. He thinks of how close they'd pressed together in the wardrobe, his cheek to the woolen coat, and Hannibal had held him so tightly.

He's drunk, and it sounds like a god damn dream. He needs to hold it together but he can't, and this was the sort of drunk he'd once told Hannibal about, the kind of drunk where being an empath wasn't so bad. The dangerous kind. The kind where reality can be a dream, the dream being a life where one could touch someone whenever they wanted.

He doesn't often think about touching people, but dreams are like that. You want something you don't allow yourself to normally think of. You long for it. You hope for it.

"Dreams," he manages to say –out of all of that –and he follows Hannibal into the house, taking his jacket off and allowing it to hang in the hallway. "How did you follow me into my headspace? I thought to ask at the time, but I…"

He inhales the taste of Hannibal Lecter's home, and he trails off, studying the warm tone and how it continues to constrict his heart, panging tight and hungry. He wonders what Alana would say, if she could see him now. Obsessed, indeed.

"You grabbed my hand. I've heard it sometimes possible with E-2's, so I supposed it plausible with an E-3. It's never happened to me before, but it's an experience I'll never forget. I thought to thank you for it after, but it seemed a tasteless thing to thank you for."

Hannibal leads him straight to the guest bedroom. It makes sense, given how he struggles up the stairs, but it makes Will think of how closely they'd been pressed, how lightly he'd been touched. Fuck, he's too drunk. He can't handle the overwhelming sense of his own feelings at the moment. He's once again grateful he can't sense anything from Hannibal.

He'd eaten monkshood within the shabby shelter of Will's crumbling brain. Hannibal Lecter truly was something else.

He wants to say as such, but he forgets to, somewhere between shuffling into a spare set of pajamas and having a glass of water forced down. He watches Hannibal's ease, how his vision wavers in and out but still continues to fixate solely on him.

Alana thought of it as obsession. Will wonders what Hannibal would think of his breaking into his office.

"You didn't tell them what I said about the empath," he recalls, just before Hannibal leaves the room.

Hannibal pauses and acknowledges it with a tilt of his head. Will's vision swims, and he fully accepts he will be vomiting in the morning. "I am in your corner, Will. I wouldn't have you doubt that."

A rogue empath hunting him down to make him *Become* wouldn't look good while his mind crumbled as he chased Dolarhyde. Hannibal is protecting him.

"Do you remember when you asked about my sex life, Dr. Lecter?" Will asks, unprompted.

Hannibal's amused, and Will's too drunk to yet feel shame. "Good night, Will."

"No, I'm going somewhere with this. For your study of empathy."

There's something about Hannibal, how he looks at Will. Sometimes Will thinks it's that he's intrigued or amused, or he wonders if he is a puzzle that the doctor is trying to put together. Perhaps there is something less professional in how his eyes darken perceptively, but this is the sort of thing that is dangerous for Will. He's only feeding off of his own emotions, and his own emotions are terrible at best and terrifying at their worst.

"I spoke of being able to numb myself enough that another person's emotions and skin didn't overwhelm me."

Hannibal's smile is lethal. "I recall."

"This is how drunk I have to be in order to bear it."

Hannibal takes that information with the same expression he had when he first found Will stumbling through the hallways of the house of mirrors –hunger. Something a little wicked, and Will thinks of bare hands passing over poetry, tasting the first sense of the good doctor for who he was behind such a normally modest façade.

Will falls into a drunken stupor that could be called sleep, if it wasn't for such wonderful Dreams.

-

He dreams Hannibal is behind his sturdy walls. They rise high, and the stag paces along the tree line, watching. Somehow, the space feels bigger, a little more room for another row of herbs to grow. The poisoner and the healing hand. The air has a hint of thyme.

He isn't sure how they are naked together, only that they are. There is something in the way of his dreams that he blinks, and he is there, as though it always was. Then he blinks again and it is another place that he always was, but one thing that is for certain is that Hannibal is there, his kiss is enough to get drunk off of; Will is certainly drunk off of it, and it is to the early morning he wakes, still drunk, puking into the first toilet he can find.

He thanks whatever God is listening at the moment that he managed to get to a toilet in time. He's not quite sure he'd live down the shame of having to clean vomit off of Hannibal Lecter's woven rug that belonged somewhere in a museum rather than someone's floor.

His dreams pass over his eyes, but mornings are the best times to forget dreams. They become hazy, odd, and as he digs through the cupboards and is relieved to find mouthwash, Will is able to convince himself that he didn't have wildly inappropriate dreams about his therapist, that he didn't dream that they pressed monkshood to one another's lips, that they didn't dare and share a kiss.

It takes another round of dry-heaving and a good scrubbing of cold water to his face, but Will Graham walks out of the guest bathroom having managed to do what most people are able to do with dreams –forget them entirely. He thinks instead of the row of thyme that'd sprouted since his last trip into the bone arena of his skull.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal asks the moment Will walks into the kitchen.

He's already prepared a breakfast that was surely made with drinking in mind, a healthy helping of grease wrapped in lemon and honey-glazed salmon with eggs on the side. Will accepts it and sits up to the bar where Hannibal is busy with finishing his cup of coffee, newspaper in hand.

"Nothing I haven't felt before," Will reassures him.

"Were you ill?"

It's a nice way of asking if he vomited. He shrugs a shoulder and focuses instead on the scents of the breakfast, testing the water. Is it safe to eat? The lingering flavors sit in the back of his throat before he swallows them down and deems them safe.

"Anything good?" Will asks, nodding to the paper.

"I woke thinking about your killer," Hannibal replies, and he sets the paper down, smoothing the creases along the article he's reading. "He's made the front page."

It's the house of mirrors where Randall Tier was found. Police tape sections it off despite the fact the body is long gone and the stains are removed. The scene was a symbol, but the location in of itself is irrelevant because it was only a prop, used merely to mock Will as his mind attempts to rend itself in two.

Will remembers vaguely mentioning the killer, but it's like attempting to look through a windowpane in a downpour. Everything is streaked, grey somehow, and he absentmindedly

takes a bite of food, gloved hand gripping the fork with just a little too much pressure.

"Why did you wake thinking about him?"

"You never explained why you thought he was taunting you."

Will chews the salmon to a paste before he swallows. "Why didn't you tell them what I said?"

"Because I first wanted to understand what you said," says Hannibal without missing a beat. He tracks Will's next bite, lips pressed to a flat line. "How can I relay something I myself don't know?"

Will manages another two bites before he thinks he can explain himself in a way that doesn't make him sound just mentally unstable enough for Hannibal to turn him in. Despite the richness of the food, it's not overwhelming. The tightness in his stomach seems to be hunger rather than nausea.

"He spoke to me," he says, spearing a bite of egg.

"You heard him?"

He glances up and studies the curiosity on Hannibal Lecter's face. So perfectly neutral, and Will is tempted to remove his gloves just to reach out his bare hands and maybe *see* something for once.

"With noise and clarity."

"What did he ask you?"

"He asked if I could see."

Can you see?

"What is it he wanted you to see?" Hannibal wonders, and he presses his palms to the warm coffee cup. He leans back against the counter and props himself up, a generally rumpled appearance for the good doctor.

This takes somewhat longer for Will to share, and he forces a few more bites of salmon down, the lemon bitter but welcome on his tongue.

"Myself."

Hannibal's head tilts just slightly to the side, but the corners of his eyes tighten, and Will can see that hint of hunger, of craving for something.

I'm fond of you.

"Did you see yourself in the house of mirrors? Or did you see yourself in Randall Tier?"

“Both. I…Randall Tier is the house of mirrors. Every time he contorted himself into some shape that wasn’t his, every time he made himself into something else for every person he came across, I’ve done something like that.”

Hannibal’s laugh was light, not unkind. “You have refused to contort yourself to many of us.”

“No, but I can’t help but take just enough of everyone along with me that I can’t separate it anymore. He…he *knows* how Hobbs…”

He doesn’t want to say it. How he and Hobbs are the same, even now with him six feet under. He needs to see Abigail today, needs to prepare for the evaluation. He needs to see Abigail, but in his most terrifying dreams he *is* Abigail –but aren’t they? They both died that day, died then returned not completely whole. Maybe there is something to the thought, that he has to see her because it seems to be the only way he can marginally feel whole.

“What does he gain from making you see? What is he wanting from you?”

Will finishes the eggs and lets the tines of the fork drag through the honeyed sauce. That is perhaps what is the most terrifying aspect of it, alongside somehow *sympathizing* with the monster murdering these people. *Tools*, he reminds himself. *He thinks of these people as tools*.

“He wants me to see what they’re trying to make me become,” he admits, and this isn’t like before when fear and adrenaline forced him to be intimate and confined in tight spaces with Hannibal. It’s a quiet, immaculate kitchen, nothing in the world to distract him from honesty apart from his own blunt, stubborn refusal. “I think that…that this person is trying to save me from dying at the hands of the FBI. I think he knows something that we don’t.”

He chances a look to Hannibal’s face. It’s contemplative, his brow furrowed as he makes quick work of wiping down the counter where his mug left a ring of fog on the granite. Hazy, grey streaks of dreams come, unprompted, and Will wonders if he managed to mention that the night before, or if he’d said something otherwise embarrassing that’s caused the talk this morning.

He finishes his plate, and there’s something bordering on domestic as Hannibal takes it to rinse it in the sink.

“Why didn’t you feel comfortable telling me then?”

Will thinks of the hunger in Hannibal’s eyes that day, that tenseness as though he’d been prepared to hold Will there until he *fucking talked*. “I wasn’t sure if I could trust you.”

Hannibal’s smile is graceful this time. He offers coffee and makes short work of preparing the grounds, fresh from this morning. “You trust me now, though?”

“Dr. Lecter –”

“Hannibal.”

“Hannibal,” Will corrects, “you literally have every reason in the world to call Jack Crawford right now and have me arrested for at least four felonies. Why haven’t you?”

Hannibal doesn’t miss a beat, focused on the espresso machine. “I’ve already told you that, Will. I’m fond of you.”

“Yeah, well,” Will huffs, “I’m fond of you, too.”

And then it’s said, and it’s too big for the room they’re sitting in. It’s too big for his lungs that quite suddenly deflate, and it’s too big for the way he’s entirely sure Hannibal’s smile is more telling than it should be. He likes that smile, though. There’s something nice about it, and there’s something nice about not quite being able to read him despite the complaints to the contrary. Dr. Lecter is interesting. Dr. Lecter is different.

Dr. Lecter is staring at him.

He offers Will the cup of espresso, his lips curved ever-so-slightly. “Will you drink this without your gloves on?”

For a wild moment, Will thinks of dragging his hands over Lecter’s office, craving every inch and marveling at the vast sensations. How close he felt, yet far enough away to only catch imprints. And now he’s suddenly being given permission? He wants to rip his gloves off, touch his palms to the surface of the kitchen where Hannibal so clearly loves to work; wants to press his palms to cheeks with hollowed, cruel edges that seem sharp enough to cut.

If Alana could see him now…

He removes his gloves slowly so that the good doctor can see and understand the motion. Then, he reaches out and accepts the piping hot cup, small enough that his palms encase it.

There is a hunger there, something that drags across his ribs as a bow along cello strings. He blows on the cup, both resigned and wickedly excited for the way it’s going to burn all the way down. When his lips press to the edge of the cup, there’s a wild feeling that he’s somehow sharing a kiss, and without anymore preamble, he tilts his head back and sucks the piping hot drink down.

When he looks back at Hannibal, there’s an intimate expression on the planes of his face that suggests Will had done everything Hannibal could have hoped for. Will’s palms are still tingling, stinging from the heat, but it compares nothing to the fire in his throat that claws down to his stomach. He has the briefest moment of indulging in a bad habit, and it’s difficult to say if he picked that up from the cup, or if it’s something much his own.

Either way, he’s drowning in it, that feeling. Something that is pronounced enough it lingers long after the heat does, after his throat stops complaining from the onslaught.

“To Abigail?” Will suggests hoarsely, when Hannibal makes no comment.

“To Abigail,” Hannibal agrees.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much! I've picked up a few new readers of this, and although it took awhile between updates, here we are.

I'm settling into my new job, and I'm hoping to get back into the once a week updates for you guys after this weekend. I don't have a set day yet, but I'll have it posted on my Tumblr when I know for sure. :)

As always, I hope you enjoy!

When Walls Fall to Sunrises

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17:

"They're letting me out soon," Abigail says once the nurse leaves them. She sits by the window and looks out of it rather than make eye contact. A Seer's first and best defense was to ensure they couldn't see.

Will wonders if that's more for his benefit, or hers.

"Where are you going to go?" Hannibal asks.

Will idly paces, examines the positive quotes taped to the mirror. Are they personal, or are they a ruse? He stares at them, feels something at the corners of the edges that suggest they've been passed over many times, fondly. He wonders if they were something she put on as a show to the counselors, only she accidentally started to see what help they could give and decided to keep them.

"There are a few apartments for sublet. What little money is left after settling to the grieving families will likely carry me to it, then I need a job if I'm going to supplement what little I get monthly from the government for dad's death."

Abigail speaks with a carelessness that belies how she draws her knees her to her chest and stares out of the window fixatedly. Will passes a finger over the edge of a hand-cut star whose optimism suggests, '*Think* Positive!' and looks back to her.

"Are they making you discuss that in therapy?" he can't help but ask.

She shoots him a sardonic glance, albeit it relaxes the way she holds onto herself so tightly. "Yes."

The room feels like the harried steps of someone that knows they don't have a lot of time. How long until she was kindly but firmly removed from the hospital? How long until the government's mercy ran out and she was forced to move onto a place where there was nothing waiting? Will traces the paces she made in the throes of her most emotional fears, and he pauses just at the foot of her bed where she'd finally slid into a crumpled lump on the floor and laid for some time. Compared to how subtle, how gentle the feelings are that he gleans from Hannibal's home, it's positively unpleasant. Will tastes the hint of teenage despair, and he bites down on it.

"We won't allow you to end up on the street, Abigail," Hannibal assures her. "You're more than welcome to stay with me until you have a place to stay."

"Dr Lecter, I couldn't—"

“You can,” Will reminds her kindly, although his voice is tight. It’s not Abigail’s despair anymore, it’s his, and he’s so very relieved to have gloves on as he sits just on the edge of the bed and surveys her, fingers curling into the edge. “Dr. Lecter is helping me, Abigail.”

There’s a lot of weight to the words, and it’s not lost on her. He feels her stare, but he instead worries over the feeling of the inside of his gloves, grounding in the wake of her emotions. He’s going to let her puzzle over it and decide for herself what it meant; in truth she could choose just how much she let Dr. Lecter know. It’s the sort of consideration he’d want for himself. For them.

She glances to Hannibal and folds her arms tight over her ribs to self-sooth. “And what’s your opinion of it?”

Careful but not entirely subtle. Obviously testing what he’s willing to admit he knows.

Hannibal’s smile is utterly polite. “I’d like for you to help him weaponize his gift, of course. If it’s not too much trouble for you after what’s happened.”

Teenage girls are something to be marveled at. She doesn’t sit on his words for much longer than a second before she’s standing and facing Will with a resolute set to her jaw, be damned her fears and the mental breakdown she’d had just the night before.

“Do you think you can handle it?” she asks—her voice is not so confidant as the way she stands.

“Yes.”

“Your barriers—”

“Are stronger than before,” he reassures her. He stands and brushes his palms onto his jeans, as if to rub away what could have clung from the blanket. There was the quiet fear he’d grab her by accident as he had Hannibal, but she was going to See him anyway. Would she notice the Thyme he’d planted, should she tumble inside?

She scrutinizes him, and he studies her shoelace. There’s a long, pained pause as she tries to find just what she’s looking for, then she sighs. “Like I said before, it’s not how it sounds. You turn *their* mind around, and that’s really how you weaponize *your* gift. Your make their own mind trick itself.” She fetches chairs for the two of them from the small arts and crafts table, and she fusses with them in the small patch of sun from the window, sitting them across from one another. “No offense, Agent Graham, but even with them being stronger, it won’t help. You’re going to have to trick them and hide your reality somewhere else.”

Will glances to Hannibal whose face is wrinkled ever-so-slightly. Even with his knowledge, this isn’t something that a neurotypical—or even a trained FBI agent—would know much about. Weaponizing gifts. The words hold as much danger to them as they do promise.

The best Dreamers know how to make dreams so real they hurt.

"I'm ready," he assures her. He swallows, resents how his throat is suddenly dry.

She gives him the same searching, careful look, brow furrowed. He isn't sure if it's a test he's sorely failing, or a sign she's on the look for, but when they sit down in the small promise of sunlight, he keeps his gloves firmly on all the same because despite her willingness, there is a remnant of fear just at the curve of her mouth. No matter how willing, the three of them are taking a rather large risk, and it has absolutely nothing to do with what would happen should Agent Crawford kick the door in.

Don't want to turn her into Agent—Mr.—Jackson.

"When you look into my eyes, how does it happen?" Abigail asks, interrupting *that* train of thought. "How do you see?"

He knows what she means. "I see the eye, then I fall in. I always fall."

Abigail nods. "Most empaths do. We see the emotion before we see the situation that caused it, and that's what drags us down. It's something dad said they teach at the Academy."

"They do."

At his response, Hannibal sits up from his lax repose beside the window. It's subtle, but it's there –he wonders if there's something to be said about an empath sharing just what it's like at the Academy. While it's not forbidden, not many people discuss just what goes on within the walls whose brick and mortar house enough power to see within the most corrupt of minds, unwind the minds of the most powerful of monsters. It's a mandatory boarding school with little time allowed to visit family outside of the outer walls, and not for a moment does Will miss it.

"They teach it because it's easier for a neurotypical to see when empaths are using their gift that way. That's how they control you. When you looked at me, Dr. Bloom could tell that you were looking for the truth. I watched her watch you do it." She glosses over just *what* Will found inside of her mind. "You have to un-train yourself from falling in, or else they'll know."

They know.

"You walk in," Will clarifies, just shy of sounding awed.

"I walk in, I take what I want, and I walk out," Abigail agrees. She's entirely too proud of the admission, and it shows in the way she forces herself not to smile. "I didn't have to unlearn anything, so was easier for me than it will be for you, I think."

Easier but not impossible. Just out of the corner of his eye, Will catches Hannibal leaning back into his chair and getting comfortable. Only a whisper of the academy, merely the barest part of a hint. "What's the first step?"

"The first step is to create a space where you keep your secrets."

His secrets being the entirety of the state of his mind. His violence. His cruelty. He laughs wryly and lets his gaze wander to her nose. The freckles betray her as a mid-western American beauty. “That easy?”

“Yes,” she replies firmly. Hands clasp tight at the knees. “I do it all the time.”

Her barriers. Her barriers? Will tilts his head, and without giving any warning he looks into her eyes and tries to image himself walking in, walking instead of falling because there isn’t any reason that he can’t use his two damn feet.

And just like that, he’s walking into a wall, but walking none-the-less.

Empaths that know themselves can consciously feel the presence of another empath just within the sacred spaces of their mind. It’s feather-soft when one knows what they’re doing—perhaps just as violently prevalent, as Red Dragon was as he tore through the minds of RA’s he was told to devour—and every empath has a signature print. If one has felt it once, they’ll always remember it, and Will is as much aware of Abigail *seeing* him as he is seeing her wall.

The place where she keeps her *secrets*.

“You don’t see anything because my emotions aren’t overwhelming you into a memory,” Abigail explains, and Will nods along. “People don’t usually keep as much hold on their memories like they do their conscious thought. That’s how they don’t know if you’re digging around for it unless you’re being mean about it.”

Minds aren’t blocked so *well* as this, at least none that Will has encountered before. Even resilient RA’s that made it consciously to the end were easy to break through, their barriers just as shifting as Will often felt his was. He wonders if she likes the thyme within his slowly strengthening walls. He wonders if she is afraid of the Monkshood.

She’s not beside him, but he feels her near as he passes hands along brick that is impenetrable and sturdy. Made to last, like all the other ranch-style houses were in their prime. Solid brick, a dark, aged pink bordering on brown, and there’s something familiar about it as he presses hands and can’t pass through it.

Abigail is testing as much as Will is. He feels her *Seeing* him. “Can you Dream a wall around this place? A wall past…past the sand.” Will’s spit curdles at how she hesitates in saying it.

“Is it as easy as a dream?”

“If you Dream it well enough, you can make a place they can get lost in so they can’t find the cracks inside of it. Like this.”

And just like that, Will blinks and he finds himself within a room as ordinary as you please, only he recognizes this room because it’s one he walked through once as he was on his way to find Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He turns around slowly, and Abigail is beside him. Her

face gives nothing away. The aged brick is now as memorable as the fireplace that lays empty just to the side.

He'd passed by that fireplace to go and press his hands to her dead mother's neck.

"This is what I imagine the Seer that sometimes visits group therapy sees when she manages to catch my eye. My secrets are always behind my wall, and this is the perpetual waiting room." Will senses her smile, feels it in the wallpaper. He blinks again, and she stands behind him with her arms folded tight around her, as much a self-soothing stance as it is a defensive stance.

He can't reciprocate her humor, though. Will supposes it's the way the room makes him think of killing things; the last time he saw this place, it'd been painted in death, the very air seeping it. He feels it in the carpet just beneath his shoes, and it reeks off of the 1980's wall hangings her mother never updated. He inhales Garrett Jacob Hobbs, then drowns in it.

Without a second thought he Dreams away his gloves, and he takes Abigail's hand tightly, surprising both of them as he finds himself quite suddenly yanked behind her walls where her secrets come tumbling out around him in a torrential downpour.

Don't know how this is going to—

Never thought my father would—

How'd he save me? How'd he manage to save someone like—

--don't think he's ever going to—

WHAT IS HE DOING WHAT IS HE—

Will looks around the wide, open space, and he inhales the crisp morning air that leaves his throat cold and prickling. It's Fall, and his boots make leaves snap and break as he spins around, taking everything in. He's not in that hell-house anymore.

He's not trapped outside of her barriers.

"Don't keep secrets from me, Abigail," he says, turning around slowly. His eyes are fixed to the forest. "You're the reason I'm in the mess."

It humbles her, to be reminded that despite his troubles he did know how to use his gifts. He wonders if Garrett Jacob Hobbs had to struggle with her pride, or if he was so proud of her he didn't mind it. There was something to be said how he cherished her above anything else in the world, that he'd destroy himself over it. A father's love, only it'd been poisoned.

"Do you think like that because this place reminds you of the cabin?" she asks, softly. Although she can't see the thoughts directly, she feels it, a shift in the way their minds connect. While she is more present with what *he* is doing in her mind, Will is more than aware that Abigail is now sitting on one of the benches in the garden, very still and very somber.

“That’s because it *is* the forest where the cabin is,” Will replies, turning about. The sun arcs overhead and casts dappled light from golden, aging leaves. The air is tangy with apples beginning to get too ripe in the late August sun. There’s the rot of the leaves underneath their feet.

“I’ll never see this place as it is again,” she explains, but that isn’t quite it, is it? He chases the tail end of a lie, and he finds it beneath the edge of the woods where an apple tree bears rotting fruit.

“Your favorite memories are hunting here,” he says. Just at his feet, the poor remnants of a long-molded and withered core persisted to survive. “You shouldn’t feel guilty about that.”

“If you do it *that* obviously, they’ll know you’re hiding something,” she snaps, and without warning the walls are in place and they’re standing at his door, his shabby, shabby door. She’s shaken, and although he’s reluctant to open the door for her, he feels the need to even the playing field a bit.

“Use what you find against them,” she says, and she tracks his hand as he unlocks the door and opens it. “If you have your walls up, if you let them think they found you, then their emotions don’t overwhelm you and you can walk right in. They won’t have a guard up.” A pause. “You *know* they won’t have a guard up.”

He hesitates only a moment before opening the door. He has to think on his feet what sort of place the FBI would believe he kept his secrets, the place where he stored his realities. He wonders if there’s something to Abigail purposefully making her waiting room the front room, the place where everything went so wrong. Did the empath that read her say she longed for community? Did they think she was homesick for what she’d never find?

Will opens the door for her, and he follows her inside.

He gives her time to look around. He walks along smooth rocks and grainy sand and makes his way to the riverbed. Sunlight glitters and winks on the water, and fish leap about. He remembers birds, and they sing in trees, a simple thing to Dream.

A wizened weeping willow drips and dips over the running water, and Abigail sits down beneath it, reaching up to the boughs. “Where’s this?” she asks. It’s difficult to say whether or not she’s impressed with how quickly he made it.

“A river my father used to fish at.”

“You remember it clearly.”

“I don’t remember much from back then, but this place I do.”

He watches the water and imagines walls around his walls, a box around his secrets. Tucked away, hidden, and there’s a fishing pole in his hand. Tucked away, hidden, he thinks this is just the sort of space an FBI empath would tell Jack Crawford about. The king of thing that might make Jack Crawford ease just, even for just a little bit.

But that's what Dolarhyde had wanted, wasn't it? Just to let him rest?

He senses rather that sees Abigail attempting to find secrets in the leaves. Fingers grasp, then puzzle over the texture. "What are you looking for?" he asks.

There's a long pause. "You felt that?"

"I'm a Feeler."

They both laugh, and it surprises Will into laughing more. He holds the fishing pole in his hand, and it occurs to him that it's not entirely a good sign he so quickly adapted to turning his mind so quickly, adapting to using his power so well. It's too easy to bend things, to easy to become now that he and Abigail share the same space, and *aren't they the same*?

Abigail caught the turn of his thought; she saw everything, it seemed. "You catch on fast," she agrees.

"I'm an RA in the making."

That sobers her enough that she manages to look away, and without warning Will finds himself within his own skin in the rea world once more, chilled and suppressing a shiver that starts from the tip of his head and fizzes out by the time it hits his feet. He's blocked out, the wall enough that he risks glancing just to the corner of her eye to try and See.

His gloves are still on, but his fingertips tingle like he's pressed his hands to something naughty. Abigail regards him warily, cornered. She once loved hunting with her dad. She loved hunting, and it wasn't lost on her that she was both the hunter and the prey.

"I'm sorry," he says immediately. "I wasn't thinking."

"You were, but not about that," she replies after a time. She wears a scarf on her neck, and it occurs to him he hadn't noticed until that moment. It's stark against the otherwise muted and therapeutically calming room. "You don't need my help. You've done something bad, Agent Graham."

Hannibal sits stiffly, and Will can't be certain if he's only just done it, or if he's been that way the entire time they were gallivanting about in their mind.

"It was an accident," he says, and he takes just as long a time as she did before he replies. His throat is dry, and he wishes for something to drink. Maybe he'd call Beverly after this. "I…I didn't know it'd leave an imprint like that."

"He left his imprint, and you channeled it like it was nothing." She shakes her head, and it's then that he can finally sense the fear from her, small but very pungent. "That's what it's like to be an E-3?"

He supposes so, and the thought stays with him, even after leaving. He stares into his eyes in Hannibal's guest bathroom that night, and he wonders if he can see something of Dolarhyde in the pupil, or if everything he saw was still some semblance of himself. He

Dreams himself into an FBI office where the standard test would be conducted, and he sits for a time on the tub, seeing it as at the edge of his chair.

He wonders if that is also what it is to be an E-3, or if any empath can spread their mind past the matter of their brain to see it in the room around them. When he hears Hannibal just down the hall, he quickly stands up and finishes up in the bathroom.

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Jack wakes Will with a phone call at exactly 7:42 a.m.

"It's the empath that's not an RA," Jack says by way of greeting. "We'll swing by and get you on the way."

Will has only the barest amount of time to get Hannibal and make their way to his house where the dogs are waiting to be let out. Hannibal is standing in the field of snow when Jack pulls up, and Will steadies himself using one of the beams holding up the porch. The energy that wafts out of the SUV when the doors open makes his hackles rise. Behind him, there is the sense that people have roamed his home, searching. He'd crushed two more bugs before he heard the car up the drive.

"I'll brief you on the way," Jack calls out.

Will takes his time buttoning his coat. His walls that morning rose high, high enough breakfast had seemed a Dream to him. Hannibal had been particularly pleased with his breakfast, a hearty liver and kidney pie, the gravy a light berry that'd been glazed just as generously over Will's pie that lacked the meat that reeked of a butcher's knife.

Will, in truth, doesn't resent the fact that he can't stomach much of meat.

Hannibal sits beside him in the car. His leg is just beside Will's, and they touch ever-so-often at the lurches in the road, the potholes that cursed Wolf Trap every winter.

"It's ugly," Jack says, handing his phone over.

Will is torn between looking or not; his need to *see* overcomes, ultimately. He glances down and stares at the poorly lit but decently clear image. "Who sent it?"

"Price got there first, I came to get you."

"It's ugly," Will agrees.

"Where your head?"

"Intact," he replies, pointedly.

"Speak for yourself," Jack grunts and waves a hand.

Will scrolls to the right at Jack's motion, and he acknowledges the next photo. His walls are high. He swore he Dreamed another row of Thyme.

“Three bodies, two identified as Irene Dawson and Samantha Meyers; one *yet* to be determined.” Another photo slides into view, and Will acknowledges it with a soft hum under his breath.

Hannibal leans over just slightly to see the photo. “A John Doe?”

“No identification, fingerprints haven’t pulled anything yet. We’ve kept it as contained as possible, but it was a couple of joggers that found it and photos are already out.”

Photos are out. Will would have to do his work in front of an audience.

The joggers found the bodies in the park’s central gazebo, and as Will walks along the park path, he finds himself stopping just at the crest of the hill where the sunshine streaks in a dart of gold along the last clinging splash of red on a stubborn tree’s branches. It’s a bright, sunny morning with brilliantly blue skies, and between the dappled light of the branches the clouds are streaks of white, reaching. Will is breath-taken for just a moment, enough that Hannibal stops beside him, enough that Jack has to look back when he realizes no one’s there to listen anymore.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asks, quiet enough Jack can’t hear as he waits for them to catch up. Will hadn’t spoken much on their way to Wolf Trap. He’d let his silence sit just long enough to likely sour.

“They chose this location intentionally,” Will says, and he looks at the spreading stain of a beautiful winter morning and how it cuts across the crime scene just ahead. “Just like before.”

“Jack said that Beverly was here.”

“If she wants to see an honest reaction, I already told her how,” Will retorts.

Hannibal smiles and follows just beside him. Jack glances back to them periodically, and his curiosity at their behavior is as palpable as the disgust that roils across the skin of everyone else around them.

The gazebo has marble steps that have been long swept clean from the snow. Will reaches the top, and for along moment he stares at the scene, stares because despite the gristly pictures that’d prepared him somewhat, it in no way prepared him for the way it looked in real life, when one was forced to stare reality in the eye.

“Where’s his brain?” Will asks, hollow.

“Where’s *any* of his organs,” Price corrects, circling the area with great care. He takes a photo and examines, squinting against the sunrise. The flash leaves bright lights dancing across Will’s vision.

“He’s empty,” Hannibal clarifies, quiet.

Will stares at the man before them, reaching for the rising sun, eyes glazed in death icy enough they haven’t yet begun to discolor. The bodies are stiff, though, the women’s skin

draped in robes with their hair flowing about the face, fixed with hair pieces on their heads.

Whispering, they are, in the ears of the man between them. Will ignores them and steps forward, his gloves removed with little more than a brief hesitation before they're pocketed and forgotten. He wants there to be some hesitation, but in truth *could* there be? The rising sun beckons him. The marble stones, the scene. He thinks of the house of mirrors, the empty man, the way he heard the man so clearly yet *could not see at all*…

He inhales, and he lowers his walls, walls that rise high and hide behind the perfect fishing spot. Still crumbling, but from within the walls he was fine. Maybe, one day he'd take Abigail to it in real life, if he could remember where it was he once fished with his father. He'd teach her to catch and release. You didn't always have to kill the poor bastard in the end.

He takes a breath before he puts his hands on the shoulders, just a hair away from touching the hands of the reaching women. The John Doe's head is open. It's empty of anything that ever made it someone inside.

Can you see?

He's sitting in a museum. Will inhales, and he tastes the warmth of familiarity, a place he's surely been before. A place much loved, a page turned over and over again, only to be returned to just when one needs it the most.

Just before them, Callumny of Apelles in its glory is fixed to the wall. He's aware of someone beside him, yet all he can do is stare at it, something he's surely seen a thousand times before because why else would he feel the need to look upon it for so long? The way the red lays along darts of gold, of hands reaching and pushing, forcing? And Slander dragging the innocent, robes of blue and white whose torch beckons torment from the all-powerful King? The King whose ears hold Ignorance and Suspicion?

Yes, surely he's seen this a thousand times before. Surely he knows which place he'd like to be.

Surely, the empath whispers, *surely, Agent Graham, you know what happens in the end when the powerless are brought before the King.*

They are devoured.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Spring has hit me with a vengeance...for those with allergies, I feel for you on a spiritual level. :)

I hope you enjoyed! Thank you so, so much for your continued support for this fic. This world is a fun one for me to work within, and I'm having a blast. :)

For those that have sent comments, rest assured I've seen them and will respond during lunch. Thank you all so much, as your words really do encourage me to keep going!

When Demons Taste Like Memory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18:

Will snaps his walls down, sharp. He's within his garden, and he's tending it, and *isn't that another row of thyme?*

It is, and he thinks of the walls around his walls, hiding his secrets. The empath can't get him here. The empath can't dream himself *here*.

"Whenever you're ready," the annotator tells him.

He looks around, and he stares at the sun rising high, arms reaching to brush against a promising sky. He can't stop staring. Surely Jack and Hannibal can see it, but he can't bring himself to care in the moment because the scene makes perfect sense. The scene he is currently playing, the victim he portrays so well.

"He is claiming the victim, that he is being dragged before the FBI with nothing more than false accusations and slander," he lies, and if there are other empaths around that are trying to sense him, he thinks it's a damn good lie. It's easy on the tongue, and there's a wild streak of memory that darts in front of his eyes in his hiding, in his misdirection; his dream where he kissed Hannibal.

It wakes him from what the killer implanted for him to find—a cold shock of water to the face. He looks to Jack and pushes the thought from his mind, finding enough sense to pull his gloves back on.

"He's…trying to paint a picture," he explains, and just beside Price, Beverly Katz watches with narrowed eyes. Far behind her, the public gawks behind the police line, uncaring of the snow. News, cameramen, and social media gurus alike are bumping shoulders, waiting for that moment to catch an empath…*doing* whatever it is empaths do.

"Is he speaking again?" Beverly asks before the annotator can. The jostling of ceremony, of the *process* and *procedures* is irritating to the annotator, and it's apparent in how they adjust their blazer, a quick tug from the hand also holding the pen. Will hopes it doesn't stain their jacket.

"He doesn't trust you not to be the bad guy," Will says. Then, wryly, "the FBI, that is. He wasn't thinking of you specifically, Beverly."

"But is he speaking," she repeats.

"No."

"How are your walls?" the annotator asks, getting control of their crime scene.

“Sturdy,” Will assures them. It’s a little sobering to think he’s somewhat telling the truth. Walls within walls within walls. Sturdier than the last time he stared at a dead body like this.

Beverly moves to the body, and the annotator follows to jot down any notes of worth, should they hear them.

“Did you get any sense of identity?” Jack asks when Will draws close.

“Whoever they are, they know how to hide themselves. Not only can they manipulate and distort what they leave behind, they can stay under the radar…I don’t have the kind of training to find someone like that.”

“You can’t break past his memories and *find* something?”

“I risk exposure if I dig too far and find his madness. I used my hands, Jack.”

Just past Jack’s shoulder, Hannibal talks to Beverly beside the bodies, at a distance and in close enough earshot of Price and Zeller. She doesn’t seem upset, merely focused on Hannibal’s words, hands idly resting on her hips.

“One of these girls was a senator’s daughter,” Jack reveals. “What kind of training do you need?”

“The kind of training no one can teach, *Jack*,” Will snaps. A senator’s daughter means *nothing* to the man that guts people for fun. To think such a position of status would stop him is laughable, but Will is in enough control of himself not to laugh. Something residual from the killer? Maybe, but now’s not the time to show it. “It’s illegal. It’s called weaponizing your gift.”

“You’re saying you can’t find him?” Jack demands –likely not as harsh as he intends, but still harsh enough to prickle.

“I mean unless he makes a *mistake,* I can’t find him. I can’t find an intelligent psychopath like this—they’re not something the Academy thought we’d be up against in my line of work. Minds mended and whole are harder to see inside when they know how not to be found.”

The lights from the media flash just beyond them. He’s relieved it’s cold enough people may not realize he’s the empath just because he’s got gloves on. He’s relieved they’re far enough away they can’t pick him out of a crowd, can’t see the way he can feel their curiosity. It’s sicker somehow, sicker than the way the scene even happened because this man may have been cruel, but what’s crueler than being in a position enough to watch and take note of the horrors within the comfort of your own living, intact skin? Horror was only loved in safe spaces.

“And how to *you* see him, Will? What are we up against?”

"I…" at that, he falters. What are they up against? What's *he* up against? He shrugs, helpless, and he looks to the women that hiss and whisper in the John Doe's ear –Jack, he can now say with assurance. They're standing in the middle of an art piece dedicated not only to Will, but to Jack. A show they're playing out, only Jack doesn't seem to realize just how well he knows the lines. "I think…we're dealing with a level of psychopath that can use their empathy as a weapon without being consumed by it. Somehow, they're able to completely detach themselves from the moment, from the way emotions can overwhelm us as empaths."

"How is that possible?" Jack's voice grows louder the more Will notices the number of flashing lights in the distance.

He grimaces, but looking away only pulls his gaze to the women hissing in the man's ear again, and that isn't any prettier to see, easier to feel. "I don't know, Jack. Do I look like the fucking killer?" he snaps, and at that he does notice Hannibal turning his head to look, just at the same time he notices Jack's impatient expression twist to a livid disapproval.

"I didn't hear that," he snarls, and he leans in, shoulders squared. It grabs the entirety of Will's attention, arresting. "Did I, Will?"

One beat, then two. Will rips his eyes away, to the sunrise where things are terrible because of how beautiful they are in their perfection to the scene set before them. He smiles a little, then rubs his face with his gloved hands.

"You didn't, Jack. But I'm just telling you what I know, and this isn't something I know. I think…he's' taunting us. Because he knows how to do something we don't know how to do, and he knows I can't do it because it would land me in prison."

Or permanent retirement.

Jack doesn't want to accept his words. He stews on them as Will makes his way to Hannibal, who's somehow detached himself from Beverly and is preoccupied with examining one of the marble columns and the way the sunlight hits it. Will notes just how far it is from the actual scene, and he can't help the twist in his chest at the consideration that's entirely too obvious.

"How are you?" Hannibal asks when Will steps up beside him.

"You surprise me every time you don't react to some new crime scene thrown at you," Will says by way of reply. He doesn't pretend to examine the statue with him, mostly because he's done studying the scene. He doesn't want to look back again. The words sit on his back, the ones he spit at Jack. He doesn't have luxury of pushing Jack. He's got enough enemies that his own direct boss would be a terrible addition.

They know.

"My work before this wasn't entirely innocent, as I may have mentioned," says Hannibal, and he looks away from the column. His eyes linger on the picture before them, and Will can't quite trace the emotion as his lips press down tightly. "Would you like to wait for your session before you discuss anything?"

“Yes.” Will can’t quite bring himself to stop looking back to the onlookers. Their pale, neurotypical stares. Curious, not at all realizing just what they are witnessing. “What’d Beverly say?”

“Agent Katz wasn’t quite sure what to think of your revelation. I think she was expecting more, given what you promised her over dinner.”

“I promised her the truth. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Which is all anyone can ask,” Hannibal agrees. “Do you need to leave?”

Will doesn’t want to look back to the bodies, but he forces himself to. He can’t say if it’s because he needs to prove to himself that he can, or if it’s because there’s something in the way the empath spoke that keeps him looking back. How could a voice sound so familiar yet so utterly unknowable? A voice that could belong to anyone, anything, and he wonders if maybe he knows the Dreamer, otherwise why else would their voice mimic the forgetful nature of a dream?

“I’d like to leave. I don’t know if there’s anything here for me,” he says, and the annotator lingering nearby nods, pen poised over the paper.

“Your walls are sturdy today, Agent Graham,” they say.

It’s not until Will is tucked into an SUV headed towards Wolf Trap that he realizes he’s never once asked the annotator’s name in all of his years working with the FBI.

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“I’ve been thinking about *Callumny of Apelles*,” Will says during his therapy session later that evening.

Work dragged. No word of Dolarhyde, no word of the Dreamer on the loose. No word on how they’d combat an empath that knew how to weaponize. Knew how to hide. No word on the exact day of Will’s psyche-evaluation. Sometimes they liked to spring it. Sometimes they let a sharp white piece of paper carry the weight for them. It was coming up, though. That much he knows.

Will wonders how Francis Dolarhyde is doing. If The Great Red Dragon is treating him well.

“Do you feel particularly accused of something?”

“Yes,” he says. And then, “no.”

“What made you think of it?”

“Because that’s what he painted,” Will replies. He’s standing by the fireplace, the warmth at his back and making his palms hot. Hannibal, still seated at his office chair, had let Will pace some of the emotions off of the soles of his feet and waited until he was ready to speak.

“So he did speak?”

“He did,” Will affirms. He looks around the room, thinks of when he’d crept in alone and stole hands along the walls and book bindings. “He’s powerful…he…”

He doesn’t know how to say it. How can he put to words what he feels when the Dream takes hold? The care, the artfulness in how it feels so utterly *real*, but there wasn’t anything real to the way that touching the John Doe’s skin hadn’t brought any true pain.

“How do you see him, Will?” Hannibal asks, echoing Jack from that morning.

“He’s…intelligent, Hannibal.” He starts slow, trying to gather his thoughts. He can be honest with Hannibal. The thought lends itself some sort of power. He inhales sharply. “He’s an intelligent psychopath whose talent in empathy is such that he has…*layers* to his Dreams. He can literally dampen the feelings and events of the scene of a crime just by Dreaming over it, and that’s what I feel when I put my hands to it. He’s a sadist, but…but he *chooses* to remove the agony of a murder to talk to me instead. He finds me useful, then, or at least interesting. Being an E-3 has its drawbacks.

“I…don’t know what he’s seeing, though, what he’s thinking. If he has the power to distort the space around a real, tangible place for empaths to find later, do I have to sit and watch the bodies stack until he makes a mistake that I can find? How close is he to me that he has such intimate knowledge of what’s going on around the FBI? It could mean he works there, and I’m just not looking hard enough.”

He pauses and looks towards the far wall where the windows were covered in thick swathes of gold and burgundy. He’d once tried to draw it back, only to find that Hannibal was an old-fashioned sort of person and had several layers to what he referred to as *drapes,* not curtains. “That lends the question, though…that lends the question at just how powerful he is, that he could fool the FBI for so long and work underneath them? This is a dangerous person. I don’t…know how to find him yet.”

Hannibal is quiet, watching Will with the same expression he always seems to. Will rubs his mouth, his words unsure on the curl of his lips, and his other palm begins to get too hot.

“But some part,” he says, and his voice is a little lower. The fire cackles behind him, pops and hisses the last bit of moisture from a branch. “Some part of me…wants to protect him. Because even though I can’t see him, we seem to have a lot in common.”

Hannibal tilts his head curiously, a small frown at his lips. It’s not disapproving, although it’s not in the least pleasant. He steeples his fingers. “What makes you feel that way?”

“We’re both willing to break the law to save ourselves. Survival instincts are in our blood.” Will replies. He wanders over to Hannibal’s desk. It’s normal tidiness and strict attention to the spaces between pencil and pen is distorted by the scattering of drawing paper, perhaps something he did between patients that day during his lunch.

He studies the strict, sharp lines that define what seemed to be an elegant, Tudor-style manor of sorts. Hannibal graciously stands and moves his chair so that Will can study it at a closer angle. “My old boarding school.”

“You seem the type to have gone to a boarding school,” Will replies, not unkind. Just beside the pencil, he spies a scalpel. He picks it up and holds it to Hannibal, more of a question than an offering.

Hannibal allows the change of subject, his dark eyes calculating but amiable. Will wonders what *he* saw at the crime scene, what analysis ran through his mind. The tide shifts once more, and he again resents the lack of ability to simply *see*.

The scalpel is accepted, and Hannibal demonstrates sharpening the pencil just beside the paper. “I found during school that a scalpel cuts sharper and better lines for drawing. I prefer a fine edge to my art.”

“It’s art,” Will agrees readily, looking back to the piece. The boarding school is drawn in what could only be described as a factual way. There was no emotion to it, the sort of thing drawn from a memory but not a particularly poignant one. He wants to press a thumb to it and twist, and there’s a wild moment where he’s not quite sure if that’s residual from the crime scene, or if the ugly thought is his. He wonders what he took from the killer, what the empath dared to leave behind.

“I believe I have a school book somewhere…” Hannibal walks away from him, and Will is just brave enough to drag a finger along the blank space just beside the trellis. He can't ruin it; he exhales, and the wild thought is abandoned.

He does move the picture, though, to see the one beneath. There’s the rustling of paper, then quiet. Hannibal’s footsteps along the bookcases make no sound.

Will’s breath catches, and for a wild moment he can only stare blankly, simply no thought coming to mind as all that he can do is *process*.

I’m fond of you.

Will Graham is not a vain man. He is smart enough to know he can be seen as attractive, but he is humble enough to not suppose himself to be anything remarkably extraordinary.

The curves of skin, in contrast to the lines of the house, are gentled with reverence. Will glances about, and Hannibal is in the loft, his back turned. Greedily, he tugs a glove from his hand and touches the paper, swallowing down a rush of spit.

Hannibal’s drawing of Will feels first, gentled in a sort of awe. Then, greedy, wanting. Hungry is the word for it, but the sort of hunger that makes mouths soften. He draws Will with his back turned, although it is bare, and he wonders just what it is he’s hiding that Hannibal feels the need to draw him turned away. It’s Greek in nature, as if Will is made of the same marbled stone as the gazebo that demonstrated Callumny and her cruelty. Maybe no longer the victim, but the one holding the entire play.

It's what they know that's important.

He's never thought himself so beautiful as it feels in this moment, bare fingers on the curls of his graphite hair.

"Oh," Hannibal says, just behind him.

Will turns, but he's caught by the wrist and held fixed, Hannibal's expression unreadable. He looks to the drawing just behind Will, displayed nakedly with a guilty glove beside it. He looks back, and his politely gloved hand lessens its grip, albeit only slightly.

Before Will can speak, Hannibal leans in and presses a hungry kiss to his lips.

Obsession, Alana had warned him of. Obsession, like Will isn't suddenly arrested by the sharp and delightful way waves of hunger wash over him. Perhaps waves aren't so right, but ripples, starting where their skin touches and spreading lazily over his skin. Muted, as Hannibal had once described it. Muted, but present, tingles of awareness that make him hungry for so much more, hungry in a way he's never quite felt before.

He's not overwhelmed. He presses closer, and his hand is released, to better press fingers to his cheeks. One hand is gloved, but the other feels stubble and the gentled thrum of pleasure.

And it is coming from Hannibal.

His mind swims, dizzies with the rush of it. Has he dreamed of it like this? No, no, but it is all the sweeter, and his back is arched over the desk as Hannibal wraps arms around him and tangles fingers into his hair. His skin is his own. His own skin and his own bones.

He kisses with enough want to bite, to sting a little. Will is buzzed off of just how much he likes it.

And then they are standing apart, and his hands are by his side. Hannibal is staring at him, simply staring, and Will is just greedy enough off of the endorphins of it that he sets his bare hand on the drawing beside him. He's feeling something.

He's feeling something.

I'm fond of you.

"Oh," Will says. His heart sits at his feet, and it beats in slow, ugly thumps. Hannibal's hunger sits in his veins, and the memory of how the pencil pressed into the grains of the page sit fat in the whorls of his fingertips.

"Are you processing?"

"A little," Will admits. Before Hannibal can misunderstand, he adds, "I'm not upset."

"I'm fond of you," Hannibal says, and he allows that to show on his face for the briefest of moments. His hair is askew, but only just, and Will has the impulsive urge to fix it.

Hannibal glances to the drawing again, then back to Will. His eyes are fixating. “I suppose that was my thought in drawing this.”

“I can feel it,” Will agrees, and his heart is climbing up, up, and it sits in his throat. “I can…I could feel you, Hannibal.”

“Do you?” Hannibal wonders, and his eyes fall back to Will, his gaze falling to his lips. “*Do* you, Will?”

Can you see?

Will takes his other glove off, and he cradles them along his jaw as he kisses Hannibal with a hunger, as though they are rolling along the fields within the walls of his slowly strengthening mind, tucked away with a Dream. He wonders if Hannibal, whose own consciousness is powerful enough to resist the power of empaths, can feel anything in the way Will holds onto him, if he can glean insight and awareness in the way Will kisses as though he hasn’t been touched by another human being in a long time.

But he presses back, just as needful, and Will wonders how long it’s been since Hannibal has felt someone feel just what was behind the mask.

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He wakes up the next morning and lays there for a time. His dreams had been quiet, muted. His walls were sturdy, and in the dark space of night when one dances between rest of wakefulness, he had imagined himself tending his walls, both ones with trap doors and the one whose repair mattered most. Monkshood and Thyme grew in the same rows of the garden. The Stag watched from a distance.

His lips are a little swollen, although it could be argued he picks at them too much to let them heal. Hannibal’s kisses were needing, although there was nothing in the way of complaint. Will scrubs his face with cold water. He wonders if Garrett Jacob Hobbs is still standing in the fields just outside of his walls.

Jack’s got him on the phone before Hannibal finds him with a second cup of coffee, and he accepts it greedily.

“Got a tip on the RA,” he says; despite the grim statement, Jack’s positively pleased. It takes Will a second too long to recall the RA is Dolarhyde. *If you can’t find the Dreamer, why continue with that investigation?*

“He’s been sighted in the Baltimore area,” he adds.

“What tip?”

“CCTV outside of a K-mart.”

“Do you need me there?” Will asks. It’s too hot to sip the coffee, but he blows on it stubbornly to try and speed it up. Hannibal watches intently from his place just across the table.

“It’s been so long it’s contaminated,” Jack replies sourly. “But now we know he’s keeping tabs on you. I’m thinking of keeping you at HQ.”

It’s hard to reach the tone of his voice, especially over the phone. Will isn’t sure if he should take it seriously, or if it’s simply another way to trap him in a corner to retire him.

He sets the phone down and puts it on speaker, for Hannibal’s benefit.

“Do we know his next target?” Will asks. “Not likely it’d be me.”

It’s the opening he knows he’ll always give that Jack won’t take the bait for. “Very likely it’d be you.”

No, no; it meant Slowinski was there, Slowinski was in *Baltimore* for some stupid reason, otherwise Red Dragon wouldn’t be lurking there.

But Jack doesn’t Will know Will knows that, does he?

God, he’d better not.

“I think there’s something personal to his killing Jack…all of this is personal, but I’m not personal. I’m just the RA-hunter.”

He takes a sip of coffee, not sure what he’ll do when he has to go back to grinding his own coffee beans. It’s a guilty luxury, but one none-the-less. He wants to touch his lips again, to see if he still Feels it.

“Yeah, well…Dr. Bloom says she’s gotten word about your six-month-evaluation,” Jack says, and the sudden turn isn’t lost on him *in the least* because there was something in the randomness of it, how he deliberately made it somehow worse than Dolarhyde potentially hunting him.

Will stays quiet, and he spares a glance with Hannibal.

“How are you feeling about it?” Jack asks “I know you’ve got a lot on your plate, but don’t think I’ve forgotten everything that’s happened.”

Don’t forget you’re always being watched.

“I’m feeling good, Jack. You got a date from her?”

“I’ll ask her to e-mail you. You’ll have it when you come in.”

And it’s there, there hidden in his tone that Will hears it. He looks to Hannibal, then looks to the phone, and like before, when Hannibal pressed his palm to Will’s, he sucked down the piping hot cup of coffee and set it down sharply, allowing the sharp sound to linger into a bitter silence.

You’ll have it when you come in.

“Thanks, Jack,” he says, sincere. His voice is hoarse and his throat scalds, but he means it. “I’ll see you when I’m in.”

The line goes dead, and his screen flashes to the call time before going black.

He accepts a glass of water from Hannibal, the carafe fogged from the ice that clicks and smacks together. He watches the ice bob and sucks the water down quickly, allowing it to both burn and soothe his throat.

“I’m going to walk into an evaluation,” he says, and it sits fat in the air. Outside, snow stirs. Supposedly, Red Dragon lurks.

“Do you suppose?” Hannibal wonders, and his hand rests without hesitation on Will’s. Will allows it, although his hands are gloved. He is torn between withdrawing his touch or removing the glove.

His lips still hummed from the feeling of their kiss.

“I know him…I know Jack,” says Will. “I know how he sounds when he’s hiding something.

Hannibal doesn’t push him as he gets ready, doesn’t press when he decides to take his own car in. He needs the reassurance of a getaway, although there’s a detached part of him that is too cool to have accepted what the rest of him is resigned to. Standing on the stoop of Hannibal’s house, he’s kissed once more, and he’s allowed to taste something much like hunger, only it left a sweeter aftertaste of victory.

Will drives to the FBI, and Garrett Jacob Hobbs sits in the passenger seat beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are! I apologize for any errors. This was posted on my lunch break. :) Enjoy!

Thank you again to all of those that have been so kind, patient, and supportive through this. <3 Your understanding is amazing, and the fact that you all keep coming back to read this is such a treat! :D

With Wandering Eyes We See

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19:

“Do you ever miss your mother?” the proctor asked.

That’s what they called them, proctors. The ones giving the evaluation. Beside them, an empath sat at strict attention. Their hands were bare and touching his.

He didn’t like it, but they knew that.

He saw the same office they were sitting in, even as he saw it within the mind of the other empath. They’d made a small office for him to feel secure within. It didn’t matter if you got A’s in the Academy if you couldn’t pass an evaluation.

“I don’t know her, so I can’t miss her,” he said, looking around the room. It was always odd to him that they pictured the exact same room as they one they truly sat in, as if empaths were so weak they couldn’t handle seeing something outside of their reality.

*He wondered if the fucking Feeler felt **that**.*

“You miss something, though,” the proctor replied.

“I miss the idea of a mother. I think they’d maybe visit. But I don’t know my mom, so I can’t miss someone I don’t know. I think a mom would be nice, and I miss the idea of what I imagine it’d be like.”

“Do you make lines like that distinct in your mind? The idea of a mother is supportable, but a proper mother isn’t?”

“The Academy taught me to make all sorts of distinctions. Any distinction you’re worried I’m worrying over are only in my head because you put them there.”

“Are you feeling vulnerable, Will?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Just a question.” The proctor smiled.

“I’ve been having bad dreams. So maybe I’m coming off grouchy,” he allowed. He didn’t look at the proctor, focusing instead on the tactile feeling of the empath’s hands in his. Their skin was clammy. It made him feel in control.

“Bad dreams,” the proctor repeated.

“Yeah, bad ones. I just wake up scared, so I want someone to comfort me. I think a mom would comfort someone, so maybe you misinterpret it as I’m missing my mom.”

“Where do you think the bad dreams are coming from?” the proctor asked.

Will contemplated it; at least, he pretended to. He stared off towards the curtains, wondered if he’d hear it when the lunch bell rang. “I think I’m stressed. But you know I’m stressed. Graduation’s coming up, and who knows what’s next.”

“You know what’s next, don’t you, Will?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if the EBAU is going to work out or not. I don’t know if it’s the right job for me yet, so naturally in my teenage adolescent mind it translates to a bit of stress and a bit of nightmares.”

“You sound defensive, Will.”

“Do I?” Will wondered, and he looked to the proctor and smiled. “I wonder why.”

“Evaluations are nothing to be afraid of, Will. Just what could you have done to make you fear not passing?”

He didn’t think of it then, thankfully. And later, after receiving a passing grade on his psyche-eval, he lay in bed that night and waited awhile before he allowed himself to fall asleep.

Asleep, where he quieted the nightmares of the boy in the room beside him, always thankful while they Dreamed but never present when Will woke. Awake, the nightmares stuck, and he wondered just how in the world the poor boy could ever miss a mother like that.

Will sure as hell didn’t.

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When Will touches the Feeler’s palms, they give him the courtesy of falling back into the Forest rather than into a bland, standard FBI Interrogation room. The older you get, the less they control just what the interrogation room feels like. Will can’t say if that’s because they suppose adults are in more than enough control to create what makes them comfortable to share their secrets within, or if they’re hoping to catch someone off guard, depending where they fall.

Will stares at the river, the fish leaping for the bait. Sun glitters gold and mica as the water gurgles and dribbles over rocks just teasing the shore. It’s more than beautiful, more than what it was when he was last there. His room. His safe space.

They sit just beside water, at a small park table that he hadn’t conjured up. He wonders if the Feeler did it to have a less awkward way to continue holding his hands.

The Feeler across from him smiles and squeezes his hands once.

The river runs high past the deceptive shallow's edge, not enough to sweep small children down the way but enough that parents would be mindful of the risk. There are no children, though, and thankfully there's no rotting flesh of Garrett Jacob Hobbs shambling about. Will thinks of walls and thyme, how there isn't enough thyme in the world to make up for the poison, but God is he trying.

God, is he trying.

"How are you feeling today, Agent Graham?" the proctor asks.

"A bit tired," Will replies.

"Bad night sleeping?"

"Well, I'm hunting two serial killers instead of one. It starts to add a bit of stress when the third body turns up and you still haven't got any answers."

"Serial killers?"

Fish jump and splash, leaving small suggestions of their erratic paths beneath the surface. Ripples drunkenly wobble and are swept away by the current.

Not RA's. Will can't quite say Agent Dolarhyde is an RA anymore. Red Dragon, arguably, but not Dolarhyde. "One's the RA, Dolarhyde. The other is an empath, but if they're working for the government, I'm not sure how."

"Can you explain that?"

Explaining is all one can do in an evaluation. "I explained it to Agent Crawford, so you've read the notes from the scene. If they're working for the government, I'm not sure how they could get away with this and not get caught. They'd have to take evaluations, same as me."

"Some people pass evaluations and go on to do terrible things," the proctor points out. They don't wear a nametag. They didn't introduce themselves.

"You shouldn't feel too hard about that, though," Will replies. "Dr. Bloom informed me once that you take your wins where you can. Sometimes, you do your best and people slip through the cracks."

"So you believe this person slipped through the cracks," they clarify.

"It's the only logical explanation as to why they'd know how to weaponize their gifts so well I'm not sure what I'm seeing when I look at what they leave behind."

"What do you see?"

Will sees the stag just by the oak tree, and for a moment he can't quite find words, cold darts of shock starting from his feet and working their way up. How had it gotten out of the walls? How had it found its way there, head turned towards him and eyes staring with the

sort of intelligence that makes him wonder if it *knew* what was going on and had to come and see for itself the joke of it all?

It's a fumble, and the proctor grabs onto it smoothly. Pauses too long make the Feeler truly *Feel*, their mouth moving to form the word *stag*, something puckering their lips like they'd licked a particularly bitter lemon. The proctor turns his head just slightly to look at it the stag with Will for a moment. "You always keep such a creative headspace, Agent Graham."

He wonders what the Feeler touches to the proctor to allow them into his head like this.

"Thank you," he says slowly. The stag watches but gives neither succor or damnation.

"Do you see this at the crime scenes?"

He tears his eyes away from the stag and looks to the proctor. "No. I see…what they want me to see. The first time, I saw them actually murdering the victim and removing their lungs. Their thoughts, their inner monologue, everything was all but scripted.

"Then, it was like a vengeful death, what with the way he'd killed him. It was his afterthoughts layered over him remembering the death. At the time, as potent as it was to Feel it, it was difficult to see that nuance."

Will pauses long enough to make sure the proctor is staring intently. Maybe it was Jack's lack of reaction when he said something much the same, but he desperately wants to see one. "But seeing the third one…the third one was completely separate from it, a clinically controlled detachment. Another place entirely, more like…a memory that is revisited. That… that allowed me to see the reality of the situation."

The proctor takes this in with nary a flicker of an eyelash at the sort of control, at the level of power the Dreamer could display. They lean back and look to the stag with the sort of curiosity of a tourist among nature, both awed yet afraid. Will wonders how much of it is an act. "What did you Feel, realizing just the sort of person you were looking into the mind of? That they could control you, an E-3 with something like a memory, even if only for long enough for you to get out?"

"Pissed," he says honestly. "I'm supposed to find someone that knows everything I've been trained to do, but he's a wild card that I can't get anything from."

The stag meanders, and if it is there for their conversation, Will can't say. When it doesn't shift, meld, or change in any sort of reaction to Will's words, the proctor looks away and allows their gaze to wander back to Will with the same apparent aimlessness the stag has. Will wonders just how much of an act the two of them are putting on for his sake.

"It must be disconcerting. Do you feel unsupported?"

"A healthy amount," Will assures him dryly. "I don't know if Jack's trying to see where the law falls on the next step, or if I'm supposed to keep wandering through crime

scenes and waiting for a mistake."

"Either way, I'm stuck fucking guessing," the Feeler says for him.

There's no question they finished the unspoken part of Will's thought. Will looks at him, and the quirk on the Feeler's lip dares Will to try and stare into his eyes to glean his secrets.

Something much larger than a trout splashes in the water, something loud and obtrusive in the otherwise peaceful ambiance.

"Is that also how you feel about the RA?" the proctor asks.

His lack of hesitation this time seems to make the river run stronger. He chews on a scabby part of his lip and rips it before he says, "I feel confused about the RA."

"Confused?"

"Yeah." He frowns. "He felt betrayed, and like he was being followed. Then, he finds…*something*, and he goes on a killing spree. But even 'spree' isn't right, is it?" He waits for the proctor to tilt his head slightly before he continues, "He's killed two people, and they were personal. That tells me that betrayal is what caused the break; so why come after me just because he knows I track RA's?"

Proctors would never admit it outside of their own break rooms, but they fucking *love* when empaths open up to them. Despite the studies into the way the brain *functions* as an empath, a neurotypical could never truly understand what it was to be one. If an empath does it right, they can create the perfect moment where the neurotypical truly *thinks* they see into the mind of someone like them, that they could ever actually understand someone like *them*…

He thinks of Hannibal, how sure he is of Will's control, how his walls are high and the maple trees are swinging gold leaves in the Midas sun.

"How does that confuse you, Will?" the proctor asks. Will imagines they take the time to lick their lips in anticipation. Somehow, the thought in his mind causes it to happen, and he realizes just how dangerous the path he's treading has become.

The Feeler doesn't so much as twitch.

And for a moment, so still and sure are his walls at the precise moment that the proctor's walls—once completely impenetrable and so far beyond Will's thoughts he hadn't first sensed them—shifted, and Will feels that flicker of hunger, of a need to feel Will's intimate thoughts.

And that hunger will surely save him, won't it?

Yes; he feels something tantalizing clear that it will.

“It just once again makes doing my job more difficult. I feel hobbled, but maybe that’s what the RA wants.”

“Do you often feel like you’re hobbled in your job?”

“Do you?”

“As much as you’d think, I bet,” the proctor confides lightly –a tactic. Confession creates confession. They’re not your friend, though; truly, it was dangerous to ever think that. *They aren’t your friend, Will*. “How do you self-motivate, Will? What drives you?”

Will pretends to think about it, although it’s something he’s known about himself for a long, long time. “I like to be useful. I like knowing that I can help people.”

“And that inspires you to keep going?”

“It’s gotten me this far. It saw me through Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and it’s keeping me trying to do my job, even when I’m hobbled.”

Leaves skitter and kiss across the table, and one lands just to the side of Will’s hand. He focuses on the way the veins are light and faint across the back of the leaf, the color splendid, and despite everything even the color of the leaves around Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ horrific cabin had managed to weasel their way into this false safe space.

He feels the beginning of a headache setting in.

“Do you think the hunt for Hobbs has made it harder to track others? Surely there’s reasonable fear.”

The proctor needs focus. The proctor needs open honesty.

“I was nervous at first, but Dr. Bloom showed me through Abigail Hobbs that there was a win, even in the loss. Abigail has opened up to me as a way to work through her trauma, and it’s helped me as a result.”

“Yes, I’d heard you spent quite a bit of time visiting her,” the proctor says—another way of confiding, this…*allowing* of information being told.

“I was reluctant at first, but she insisted.”

“Do you confide in her as well?”

“No,” Will assures them. “She’s young, and she’s in a delicate mental state. I allow myself to be her sounding board, though.”

The wind blows, teasing and mildly chilled. The leaf twists and falls across the back of his hand, scratching just the slightest. It drags once, twice. It trembles over the Feeler’s fingers and lays to rest at their sleeve.

The Feeler can’t quite Feel with it on their sleeve. Will exhales lightly.

“Do you feel somewhat like a father figure to her?”

These questions are meant to sting, he thinks, and the Feeler smiles. “Of course. That is a natural reaction to killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Going back to work was fine, though. Like I’d said before, inactivity is more maddening than going back to work.”

“Is inactivity why you started spending more time with Dr. Lecter, too?” the proctor asks curiously.

His walls are high, and so is the stream. He thinks of fish leaping, and he smiles as he laughs, mocking and low. “Did Dr. Bloom ask you to ask me that?”

“Are you avoiding the question?”

Will looks to the Feeler. “Of course not. He had advice for people like me but not like me. E-2’s with exceptional talent sometimes have seen him for therapy. He thought he could potentially help.”

“And has he?”

“I guess you’d be more of a judge of that than me,” Will tells the Feeler.

It’s another tactic, and it’s dirty, but proctors hate having the attention of the empath one moment but gone the next. Will thinks of his walls, how high they are, and the stag strides towards the stream to drink from it.

“Have you also been staying in his home?”

“I have,” Will replies.

“Do you want to tell us why, Will?”

His headache grows, but the stag continues to wander along the stream, unperturbed. He thinks of the kiss Hannibal gave him, how he felt for the first time the sudden shock of seeing beneath the layers of skin of what made him tick, the whorls of his fingerprints gleaning secrets no one else surely knew.

“He’s unique, just like me,” Will replies, and he glances back to the proctor, catching another glimpse of that hunger beneath the placid expression of mild impatience.

“Unique?”

“I asked to study him because I was curious about his inability to be read.” He allows a flicker of shock to ripple before he continues, “Did no one tell you that? He can’t be read by empaths, even an E-3 like me. He’s gotten me to agree to therapy on the grounds I get to study his mind in an effort to see if I can read him.”

It’s a blunt honesty, and the proctor chews it over as the Feeler’s grip doesn’t quite tighten but holds firm. His headache grows, but the fish continue to leap. Maybe one day he’ll show Abigail how to fish, if she ever reaches a place and time where that would even be

feasible. He doesn't think it'd be right, though, and just like the river it flows through the channel, there then gone.

His eyes water, and he sneezes. The stag lets out an odd, grunting cough that sounds mildly predatory.

"And what would you say you've learned about him, Agent Graham?" the proctor asks. Their eyes beg honesty. "So far in you studies, have you had any success?"

Will looks to their lips and allows a slow, small smile. "Oh, yes. Slowly but surely."

The headache eases, but its ebb and flow seemed to teeter between crashing back or falling away to a mild, numbing ache that he could stave off with aspirin and a cup of coffee.

"I'm glad you've gotten to have hobbies outside of work," the proctor praises. "Do you still have dreams about sleeping in a bed between the corpses of Abigail Hobbs and Mrs. Perkins?"

And the headache slams back, but it ebbs as quickly as it came, just as the stag throws his head up sharply to the citrine-hot sky, and it's both as terrifying as it is arresting, and Will's mouth opens just slightly. A breath huffs from him, just short enough to pass as a laugh.

"No…haven't for a long time."

The stag lands among the grass that sways in the cooling breeze, and he thinks neat rows of thyme, how he is both the Poison and the Antidote.

It's going to be a long day.

-

He sits and waits in Jack's office because he has nothing better to do. Jack accepts it and goes over the paperwork with Dolarhyde once more, but it's a moot point because until someone comes clean about *something*, they're not finding Red Dragon until he wants to be found.

Will doesn't say it, though. He may pass the evaluation, but Jack could decide to force him to do another one…*on a hunch*.

He may not pass the evaluation, though. That's why he waits in Jack's office. The second to know is Jack, meaning Will is third and if he doesn't pass then the fewer messengers means the better chance he has to escape.

After awhile, they give up on Dolarhyde with his circular evidence and instead tackle the brick wall of the rogue empath. Will pretends he's thinking of other ways of finding the bastard. Jack curses low under his breath and mulls things over that don't ultimately make a *fucking* difference because they can't find either one of them until something happens.

Will tries not to think on how that 'something' is a murder. A death. A body.

They sit in a mutually heavy silence as they work, something tacit in their unwillingness to discuss how his entire career sits in the balance. It simmers, hot and reeking of the unspoken implications. Why go over cases if you may not have a job by the end of the day? Why attempt to brainstorm methods of hunting a serial killer if Jack thinks you're being forced into an early retirement, only you were foolish enough to find out just what that meant?

Retirement is permanent when you're not given another option. Will sits in silence.

Hannibal supposed discretion was best, though, didn't he? He knew exactly what was at stake for Will, trusted what Will meant when he said he was in danger. He'd studied empaths long enough to know what they faced, and seeing Will's own experiences seemed to have made him concerned enough to have committed several felonies in a short amount of time.

And if the killer was as careful as he seemed—

—can you see?

Will stops reading the page in hand—really, it blurs, and he can't see because something seems to click. Something clicks, and the funniest thing about his work in the FBI was more often than not made up of those clicks; everyone thought it was all the power of his empathy that'd allowed him to find all of the RA's over the years. That, in truth, was a lie. He was no genius, but he did see patterns, and sometimes it took something so little it was all but insignificant.

But when it clicked, it *clicked*, and shock has a funny way of following that because once it clicks he feels it down his spine, one knobby vertebra after another. Something cold is sliding into his veins, cold and sick. By the time it reaches the bones within his toes, his heart has begun to stutter and struggle to find a regular beat to keep time.

Hannibal ate a lot of meat for breakfast. Will tastes the rabbit from the salad in the back of his throat, something that comes up hot and fast with his coffee.

Can you see?

He swallows the bile back down, shuddering. How little Will gleaned from him, how *real* it felt to kiss him, to *Feel* him, and didn't he say scientists and empath-specialists gave up because the studies on him were inconclusive at best and vague at worst?

I'm fond of you.

"This is shit," Jack finally admits, after he's poured another cup of coffee. His bulletin board hosts several photos of the crime scenes, the shameful display of a killer that knows how not to be caught.

"Bull shit," Will echoes, and his voice is tinny, too far away.

“How did this guy get through? Late manifestation?” Jack’s speaking, but it takes Will several pained seconds to look away from the bulletin board to focus on him, let alone understand what he’s trying to say. He stares at lips pressed flat that then pucker to the same sour expression the Feeler had when he whispered, “Stag.”

“Later manifestations are caught sooner than early ones,” he finally says. His ears are roaring, and his voice is getting too far away from him.

He’s either eaten, or he’s going to eat the lungs.

He still has an act to put on, doesn’t he? Will forces himself to stand and pace, the kind of pace that suggests he’s deep in thought when in reality all he can focus on is one fucking thing:

Can you see?

“Dolarhyde was a late manifestation,” Jack points out, but he doesn’t get far with wherever he’s going with that. He opens his mouth again, but after Will paces past him, it closes to the same pucker of thought.

“Dolarhyde was a late *find*,” Will corrects. “Some early evaluations indicated he was known before he was brought in.”

“So you think this guy was early?”

“I’m thinking early, and I’m thinking it didn’t go so well,” says Will.

“Shit, good for the guy or good for whoever saw it?”

Will’s vision blurs just slightly as he takes another turn; he thinks of how close Hannibal stood before he’d finally kissed him. “I’m thinking…scared kid, angry parent. Could be guardian instead of parent, but I’m thinking…violence. I’m thinking no report to the government *or* the cops, and a violent enough response to shut that kid up really nicely.”

“You think someone like that could skate by with no police record?” Jack snorts.

“Dolarhyde was an asset to Gateway Corp. before he became an RA,” Will reminds him, softly. The ball of his foot digs into the carpet, and he imagines something tangibly crushing beneath the weight of it. “Terrible people are just as equally capable of making good choices. An empathetic psychopath like this…absolutely.”

“I guess it’s possible, but someone like this…you think we’d pick up on something *somewhere*. He’s not hitting random, but then he’s hitting random, and whatever his catch is, is so good you can’t catch it.”

“He’s an E-1. Enough trauma and IQ, the bastard would learn quick, Jack.”

Jack’s interrupted from pressing the neurotypical need to emphasize just how *impossible* all of this is by a phone call.

Will blinks rapidly, and as the cold egg of something wicked slides down his skull and trickles along his nervous system, he can't help the nervous tic of his leg tapping as he waits for the verdict of his pseudo-career that in the end doesn't truly matter if his suspicions are correct. In truth, there's a startling revelation as Jack's hand grasps the plastic handle that dares to suggest that Will's only motive in caring is just so he has enough time to get to Hannibal Lecter's office because he's pretty fucking sure he's just found their rogue E-1, but that's not truly necessary at the moment.

One step at a time, Hannibal had once said. First, he had to hear the verdict.

I can't account for how the hunted behave before they die.

"Crawford. Yes…yes."

Will continues to pace, the sinking feeling of yolk settling into the beds of his shoes where he steps with feigned purpose. Did he have a course of action if he failed? If Jack were to hang up and solemnly ask Will to take a seat, would he attack his boss before fleeing the HQ?

"Oh, really? Yes…mm-hmm."

The window was secured by the kind of glass bullets couldn't get through. He had no escape route by jumping from an eight-story ledge, and surely if he attacked Jack there'd be the probability of a panic button just close enough to be a problem—did he even *want* to hurt Jack? His vision swims, and Will looks about the office, swallowing with difficulty. An agent sent to murder him was *one* thing, but could he do to Jack what he'd unwittingly done to Agent Jackson?

"Go ahead, yes."

Was he even in enough control to *try*?

"Well, thanks…that's…that's good to hear. Have a good one."

And the ripple of relief that radiates from the side of Jack's head and trembles over the rest of him smells like spearmint gum, the same shit Jack chews when he's trying to stave off smoking on a bad case. As he goes to hang up, Will abruptly stops pacing, and everything seems to once again click into place because now that he knows, now that he *knows*, he can move onto the next thing:

Hannibal.

"I assume you can already—"

"I got a lead I gotta follow, Jack," Will says, and his voice isn't too calm but it's calm enough to pass. "I take it you don't have to give me 'the talk'?"

He's asking it on the way out the door, though, because he wouldn't have seen relief like that from a Jack that had to but the business end of his boot up Will's ass one final time

before Will let them all down. His heart is pounding, odd, and he thinks of Hannibal's kiss and how it'd *Felt*.

If he was right, Dolarhyde and Purnell were the least of his problems.

Chapter End Notes

Well...that happened. :) This was posted during my lunch, so I only had time to check my indents. I apologize for grammar errors!

A huge, huge thanks to all of you that have taken the time to read/comment/support this fic! I appreciate the time you've taken, and to come back after a bit and see everyone that has still returned to reread and catch up on this just makes my heart warm! You're all amazing, and I only hope this chapter delivers. <3

Until next time! I'm partway through Chapter 20 and hoping to have it finished by next week for my patrons.

What Things We Dream (Pt. 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20:

“They’re just dreams,” Will assured him, thinking of his nightmare. “They can’t hurt you.”

“The best dreams can,” the boy murmured. His voice was ragged from his crying. “The best Dreamers know how to make the dreams so real they hurt.”

-Chapter 12

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“There is a foreign wave that throughout much of my years in university they studied, but it’s ultimately come to nothing. A unique outlier, someone that Seers cannot see and Dreamers cannot broach the psyche of to grow thoughts within their own mind.”

-Chapter 2

The way to Dr. Lecter’s office is not quite a direct path, but it’s direct enough. He has to make sure he’s not being followed, and surely his walls are high enough after being able to pass a psych-eval like *that*?

His head aches, but he’s fine.

When he arrives, he stands outside for a time. Air puffs from his lips, rushed clouds that twist and unfurl into reaching fingers. He has to be *sure* before he goes rushing in, he has to have some sort of *plan*, and it’s not lost on him in the least that he has a pretty fucking good hunch yet he actively chose to keep it from his boss. He doesn’t see movement, no cars coming or going. It’s late afternoon, and it seems that Dr. Lecter has a bit of a break in his schedule.

The aching sting of the cold air ultimately drives him inside where he forces his steps to slow to the sort of amble that suggests an innocent visit. The door slowly closes behind him, and he’s buffeted from behind by the backdraft, swayed by the surge of cold then sudden blast of heat.

His pulse thuds in his neck: *danger, danger, danger*.

But it doesn’t feel so dangerous, hands gloved as they are when he knocks on the office door. Despite the lack of cars, he’s leery to assume there aren’t any innocent civilians

lurking. They could have taken a bus, been dropped off by a ‘concerned’ friend, walked…

Will’s more than aware of how stupid he’s going to look, potentially interrupting a client, but he supposes there’s worse things than incurring an innocent therapist’s wrath and disapproval.

He knocks again when there’s enough of a prolonged silence; then again, just to be certain.

The door is unlocked when he turns the knob, and he wonders how much time he has. His pulse has dragged its way from his throat to his mouth, and it sits on his tongue with an obstinate pain that makes swallowing difficult. Each thud makes it heavier, each second a suggestion closer to being found out.

Can you see?

He steps into the office and looks around, air warm from a fire that pops and sings with the warning of someone naturally closeby to tend it. There is no one, though; a lunch break? A bathroom break? No shadows pass along the books lining the walls above. For just a moment, Will is alone in Hannibal Lecter’s office. He feels its emptiness, a gaping vacuum that he is falling into.

He spies the drawings still scattered across the desk, and he strides to them once more, this time with accusation. First the school—whose lines had taken a more detailed turn now that the outline was complete—then Will, whose gentled curves by comparison seemed made by another hand entirely.

Then, with his hand brazenly bare, the next page is turned.

Callumny of Apelles, drawn with such care as to be something intimate. He sees it, and in seeing he Sees, enough that it makes him blink once, twice. His eyes water, but his fingers are holding the page, and somehow he’s utterly stuck.

His fingers flatten the paper and then splay out, his palm taking up the open sky. It holds no color as the original scene, nor does blood stain red on his irises from the subjects of the crime scene. So precise, so carefully made, though, and he manages to swallow his heart back down his throat as that clicking begins to take place, one vertebra after another.

He wants to look away. He can’t, though, and the whispers of something close, so close, pull at him, tugging with the coaxing of a lover. As his fingers are shakily albeit purposefully dragged to the graphite, he’s not so much as pulled in as he’s lulled, a strange serenade that takes his walls and obliterates them entirely in the wake of its tempting persuasion. One can’t call it a destruction when he’s he wading willfully.

He’s sitting in a museum. Will inhales, and he tastes the warmth of familiarity, a place he’s surely been before. A place much loved, a page turned over and over again, only to be returned to just when one needs it the most.

Just before them, Callumny of Apelles in its glory is fixed to the wall. He sits beside someone, but even so his eyes are fixed to the painting, transfixed because never again will it be in such a glory as this, the first time they've ever recreated it without carving it into another's skin.

"You managed to escape," he's saying, but it's not Will. It's another man, someone--

--Will tastes Law on the tip of his tongue, bitterness at defeat.

"Did I?"

"I saw too late, I saw…" Will sighs, and he wonders when he's next allowed to drink without scrutiny or judgement. Probably after the final paperwork goes out. He's been under a lot of fucking scrutiny lately. "You're clever. You put yourself right in the middle of it, and that poor bastard…"

Out of the corner of his eye, the pencil pauses on a lightweight paper clipped to a drawing board. The hand is broad, brutish even though he is young.

"I was only trying to help," the young man says. His accent is clipped. "I am going to school for this sort of thing."

"Bastard," Will swears--agonized.

"I believe you called it Monstruro," he corrects, gentle.

Silence. The pencil continues on paper.

"I'm leaving for the states," he says, and Will tenses. "I wanted to see this painting one last time before I left."

"You got an innocent man killed."

"And you're the one that pointed the finger."

Something he would always hate was how calm and collected the son-of-a-bitch always was. Even the first time he'd seen the guy, he'd suspected him. He'd go to the art museum at every chance he got, and he'd stare for hours at the painting. How it'd gone so wrong was beyond him, but…

"If you ever return here, I'll never leave your side," he vows. It's fading, though, and he finds himself fading with it because he never was *there, was he? It's not Will, but another man, another caught in his web as he wove it ever so carefully around the necks of the unsuspecting.*

"Don't worry, Detective," Hannibal says, and his voice sounds so different when heard from the ears of someone that had only ever known him as a monster. "Should I return, you'll be the first I come to see. While I'm gone, though, I hope you dream of me. And if you happen to wake up in the middle of the night after dreaming of me, remember this:

“We’ll always have Florence,” Hannibal whispers into his ear.

Will’s barriers, so easily lowered before, rise high and fast at the jolt of his voice, but it’s not enough; not enough to combat the sudden feeling of Hannibal’s hands clapping hard and sharp over his ears, ungloved and reeking of ill intentions. It’s not enough to combat the popping in his ear drums as his vision doubles from the pain. It’s not enough to combat the onslaught of what it is to see Hannibal Lecter’s barriers down for the very first time, flooding him with the sensations of how it felt to kill those people, the pleasure and insatiable hunger that made him both finite yet infinite.

With fingers smudged into the graphite and ears roaring with the reality of the sort of pleasure one could gain from devouring the kidneys of their once-screaming victim, Will succumbs to the Dreams that Hannibal Lecter unfolds for him, layer by dark and wicked layer.

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Will comes to, disoriented.

It’s the same sort of disorientation he’s felt when waking up, still drunk beside a toilet he’d previously been puking into. The swaying, the dizziness, the tongue sitting furry, fat, and useless in his mouth; he checks them off with the ebbs and flows of his stream of consciousness. A thought is grabbed only long enough to be dropped, handled by hands too disconnected from the demands of the brain to do as they’re told.

It’s dizzying enough that he wants to vomit, but thankfully it never comes. He hasn’t yet broken the surface of the kind of drunken apathy that comes with drinking too much alcohol (the kind that tells you that you’re going to *vomit* and you’re going to *like* it), and *did he even drink after passing his evaluation…?*

His vision warbles and clears with each slow, uncomfortable breath, and with it is another fucking moment where things *click*; he gulps in a ball of air that chokes him halfway down. He’s trying to wake from a sleep he never wanted, and there’s something in the back of his throat that tastes like someone else’s dying breath.

Hannibal sits across from him, one leg crossed over the other elegantly. His trousers are neatly pressed, and one button has been unbuttoned to allow his jacket to part elegantly rather than bunching. It’d been such a detail that had once fascinated Will, but now it was a mark of accusation, the minute attention to detail. He’d taken his time to situate himself.

The only thing odd are his shoes, missing despite his otherwise neat appearance. Not a hair is out of place. Not a flicker of emotion ripples from his clothing. Closed once more, he is as the first time Will had ever tried to peer into his eyes.

The chasm yawns wider, and Will isn’t sure if he’s ever felt quite so alone.

Compared to his own person, slumped and groggy, Hannibal has had time to make himself this way, and so Will allows himself to take his time, gauging how he’s allowed to move and what range of movement he has. The nausea doesn’t come back, and he clears his

throat to dispel the tightness in it. His hands aren't bound, and neither are his legs. His muscles don't feel up to the task of running, though, and perhaps that's the point of not tying him up.

Hannibal watches him, eyes slitted to half-moons of amusement. His lips sit in the same flat line as the proctor's had.

"That was a bold move, Will," he says, and they could have been talking about the weather or the last crime scene they'd visited, if not for those *eyes*…

"What did you do to me."

Eyebrows lift ever-so-slightly.

"You made me Dream…what did you Dream into my mind," Will clarifies, and although the nausea passes the headache still rumbles and threatens to split his skull. He presses his fingertips to his eyes to ease how they ache, how they ache and when he Dreamed he Dreamed of flesh cutting so easily, so *easily*…

"I wonder what made you finally able to see," Hannibal says. "Will you tell me?"

"Where's your shoes?" Will asks instead. He presses harder and stars burst behind fluttering eyelids. Cold sweat collects at his temples and soaks into his hair. "Why aren't you wearing shoes?"

Quiet for a moment, save the cackling fire.

"Will you tell me?" Will presses, just as light.

"You'd have heard me," Hannibal replies simply, after a dreadfully long pause. "I didn't want you to hear."

"But you wanted me to see," Will snaps. "Why...why did you make me *See*?"

"I was curious."

"Curious," he spits. Then, "is this where you devour me, too?"

"Am I now your enemy, Will?" Hannibal asks, amused, "that you think I'm going to devour you?"

"You were supposed to be my paddle," Will replies, and it's agony to say it. How can he say it? His mind is twisting, bending, and he's not sure if it's safe behind his walls any longer because what if the Thyme was poisoned, what if he'd run out of it and there was nothing left but the poison…?

"I am your paddle."

"Then tell me what you've done to me," Will demands, and he pulls his hands from his eyes. It takes a few seconds for his vision to clear, for galaxies to give way to the only

person in the world he'd been confident wouldn't turn on him in the end.

You see, there is being able to see everything, and then there is being all-seeing. Will Graham, unfortunately, cannot do both.

"Only if you tell me why you didn't bring Jack Crawford along to investigate," Hannibal replies.

His eyes still curve in a delighted turn, almonds cut to halves. The grooves left after digging into one's palms too long. The cat who's finally gotten the dumb-as-fuck canary. Will wonders what secret he knows that makes him so fucking jolly.

Can you see?

"You know why," he says instead. "Quid pro quo: what did you do to me?"

"I didn't lie to you, you know," Hannibal says instead. "They did run tests, but I was able to Dream such a perfectly normal mind that they noticed nothing. Feelers aren't something a Dreamer can entirely fend off, but I did my best. In the end, it was all entirely in the name of self-preservation."

"Self-preservation," he scoffs.

"I didn't want them to do to me what they've certainly done to you," Hannibal says gravely. The egg yolks sit sticky in Will's shoes. Feet pressed to out-of-date carpet, churning up something much like a Plan B, should the need arise. "No matter what you think you feel now, surely you can understand that?"

Can you see?

"Don't claim you're trying to *protect* me." He wants it to sound like a snarl, but the way he's feeling leaves fatigue in his bones, sucking marrow and leaving him brittle.

"Why else would I help you strengthen your walls, Will?" Hannibal wonders, and for a moment his pleasantness evaporates, and from beneath the façade of perfect affability there is a glimmer of the monster beneath. It is cruel and lethal and had happily parted the skin from a young man's sinew and muscle just to place him in a distorted maze of mirrors. "What else could I possibly gain in helping the sort of person that was trained from an alarmingly young age to resent my very existence?"

"To use me, of course," says Will, and he leans in with the sway of a drunk man as he presses, "and with that, tell me what the *fuck* you put into my head, Hannibal."

Hannibal takes his time considering this. There isn't, for a single instant, that Will feels like Hannibal is quite entirely *out* of his head. How could he be, with how long he's possibly had to Dream whatever in the world he wished to? Just what had he melded into his walls while Will slept, unknowing? Just how had he fortified the things that kept Will safe?

Her skin is pale against the earth, and the iron in the soil is enough that it stains some parts, parts they'll likely analyze later and find nothing of note from. The earth is rich and

smells like rain. Dark chestnut hair is stark against pale skin, and won't you worry over how pronounced these freckles are, Agent Graham? They'll stand out just as sharply as Abigail's did while you held her neck together and screamed.

Don't you want to taste it? The soil and the bones beneath?

He has a dizzying moment where he feels as though he is about to be violently sick. The world lurches, and he wants to lurch with it, only his feet are solid on the ground and he's no longer both the bones beneath the soil and the hands that free them.

"You already know, Will," Hannibal replies, and his voice is not unkind. "try as you might to trap walls within walls within walls, these are not the secrets you can keep out when they come from within. I *gave* them to you. They're yours, now."

He opens his mouth—to scream something foul or to puke, he isn't sure—but is interrupted by something innocent. Innocent; but it wasn't innocent because his skin is cold, and he feels something so familiar as a distant nightmare, familiar but arresting because *how many years later and you're still dreaming that, Will*?

The air tastes like betrayal and fury. It feels like heavy secrets and fear.

The Great Red Dragon opens the office door, and before Hannibal is entirely to his feet, he is on top of him, and it occurs to Will that despite the fact that Hannibal is big, The Great Red Dragon is bigger.

Bigger, and angrier; he uses his empathy like a battering ram, and Will is forced to his knees, crippled already by the exhausting power from *what have you put in my head, Hannibal?*

Hannibal Lecter does not go down easy, though; he falls with a practiced turn of his hip, and the two are grappling on the floor. Will drags himself away, and he's barely able to picture the stag that is still in the garden, trying to keep walls up from the onslaught of the fury.

The Great Red Dragon had found his mark. Slowinski must be dead.

Hannibal's silent steps are no longer the advantage. Red Dragon hauls him to his feet by his throat, and his leverage is lost, heels slipping on the wood, desperate. He's slammed into the bookshelf, and the shelves give, books bouncing in painful ignorance around him. Red Dragon's madness is a hurricane, wave after wave swirling with no space between to breathe. Hannibal's elbow swings down with violent purpose against Red Dragon's forearm, once, twice; the third time is softer, and his face is turning red.

Will can't stop thinking of how strong Red Dragon had to *be* to strangle someone like Dr. Hawthorne and his wife; how had he been able to *fucking strangle her like that…*?

"Stop," Will says, and the stag seems to burn in the field before him, both a beacon and a destructive force of nature as the wheat around it surrenders to the blaze. "Red Dragon, please, don't—"

“Be thankful for my consideration and go, Agent Graham,” he says calmly, as though Hannibal isn’t furiously and purposefully battering at his elbow, gaze murderous as he chokes to death. “I have gotten what I came to Baltimore for. I only have one more left.”

*His eyes are bloodshot, his mouth is slack, and Will has the rippling sensation of what it’s like to strangle someone, hands taut and unforgiving against the neck of someone that has betrayed him, someone that has turned on him when it was his **job** to help him.*

“*Why did you* kill our wife?” Will asks, agonized. Mrs. Hawthorne's body is seared in his memory.

It’s enough that The Great Red Dragon hesitates, and in that hesitation, Will sees the same hesitation that the proctor had had, how Will could suddenly *See,* and Seeing didn’t hurt so badly when it was like this. The stag was still setting the field ablaze just outside the walls in his mind, the field with the death and the rot and the unrelenting wind.

It’s enough of a hesitation that whatever mental barrage Hannibal was under falters just enough; and for want of a nail, the battle is lost. He slams his elbow desperately—furiously—into Red Dragon’s forearm, and there’s an ugly snap; Will hears it deep in his gut, a confirmation.

Red Dragon let’s out a roar, and Hannibal breaks free.

“Hannibal, STOP!” Will shouts, and he’s between them before he can reason why he shouldn’t be.

Red Dragon tries to shove him, but Will grabs Hannibal and hauls him to the side with him, turning to push back the unrelenting force of the fury that is a nightmare. Madness ripples from him, and Will’s palm is bare against his skin, screaming for him to *rip his throat out, Will, rip it, tear it, take it, he’s betrayed you, hasn’t he? He’s betrayed everything you ever thought he stood for?*

“Stop, please,” he insists, and he looks to Hannibal pointedly, his breathing haggard. “Hannibal…please, I need you to be my paddle here.”

“He tried to kill me, Will,” Hannibal replies, only it comes out more like a wheeze. His throat is already a mottled, ugly red. His eyes spark death. “I’m defending myself.”

“What did you put in his head,” Red Dragon seethes, and the dark, bitter taste of his acrid hatred hits hard, buffets of fire licking about their feet. “You *tell him* what you put in his head.”

“He doesn’t take betrayal lightly, Hannibal,” Will says, softly. “Why do you think he’s making them Become?”

Hannibal processes this faster than Will could have thought him capable, so close as he is to death. He looks between them, dark eyes calculating and once again so closed and unreadable as the first time Will had ever laid eyes on him. He blinks once, twice; his placid smile returns, ever-so-slight. Will thinks his walls high, and somehow there is this over-

arcing thing, both magnificent and Grand that flickers behind them, and The Great Red Dragon is **helping** Will keep his walls high.

Rows of thyme fill the planters, Monkshood weeping from the sides. Intertwined, there is the stench of the rot of earth, pungent but necessary as the worms toil beneath the soil, making everything grow so well.

"I gave him the truth he was searching for about his rogue empath," Hannibal explains, and the choke marks leave the sound faint enough to barely catch. "You see, I am the other killer he was investigating. He wanted to know why. I showed him why."

The Great Red Dragon takes longer to process this than Hannibal did. It's enough that he leaves Will to pace in front of the fireplace, his working fist clenching and unclenching as he snarls in a guttural, foreign tongue. If the pain of the break hurt him, it doesn't show. Red Dragon doesn't know the meaning of pain. Will can sense it in the air, rank with the fetid thought of what led him from Slowinski to here, *from Slowinski to here…*

The headache from the evaluation comes rearing back in full force. Will decides to pace just on the opposite side of him. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"You are his paddle, but you are the hole in the boat," Red Dragon snarls, and something in it feels more like Dolarhyde than the dragon. It's uncertain, trembling, and Will stalls in his pacing at the same time as they face Hannibal and say, together, "You…you don't *do* that to people, Hannibal."

"Why not? Are there rules, Will?" Hannibal's lip twitches.

"With me there are. Rules, lines, and strict places because I do not have the tools you have, I don't have the—"

But there's something in the way Hannibal's eyes are still *smiling* that makes the tirade that was slowly building, wild and furious in its volcanic vitriol cut short in his throat, and it's left with blistering pain right where his adam's apple drums.

Hannibal waits for the silence to sit, and it takes that sort of time for Will to truly feel the room around him, to Feel it because so much of it is dark and black and familiar that it leaves him first surprised, then afraid.

Behind him, the terrifying Awe of the Great Red Dragon writhes and encompasses the walls, the bookcases, the shelves. Black. Ichorous.

"Oh, don't give me that look, Will Graham," Hannibal chides, but it's only slightly mocking. Somehow, it's also endearingly understanding. "That's not him you're channeling. You've taken completely over, and he's channeling your anger right now. It's not the other way around."

And that's the sort of shock that douses Will enough to completely let go of what he hadn't even known he'd grabbed, desperate and angry and had that truly been him? Hadn't that been The Great Red Dragon in all of his terrible wonder?

Surely, but…

"Francis Dolarhyde," Hannibal greets politely, and he skirts around Will to help the suddenly shaken and dazed Great Red Dragon to the chair where Will had first found himself sitting across from a man he'd supposed he could trust.

The fucking idiot.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Tuesday! :) Thank you so much for your support for this work. I'm in the business of looking at new laptops due to mine deciding that the best way to work is to take about 30 minutes just to start up...who knew that after 7 years or so they don't like to do their job?

And just like that, we're here...I am currently working on the next chapter, and I'm hoping to have it up much faster than before, (like I always say -_-) but we all know how that goes. Thank you for your patience, and thank you for being such a fun fandom to write in. <3 You guys are the best.

Where does the Swallow Fly? (Pt. 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20: Where does the Swallow Fly? (Pt. 2)

Dolarhyde handles his broken arm much the way a seasoned FBI agent would. He cradles it but made little to no comment. There seems to be to him far more pressing matters, so the matter of his pain can wait. In it, Will senses a familiar pressure of someone having been used to dealing with long periods of excruciating pain.

He sits where Will once sat, and Hannibal had taken the place just across from him, poised on the edge of his seat. He made no move to adjust his collar or tie, although it left them askew and exposing the mottled skin beneath. Hands best fit to choking. Hands best fit to hurting.

It left Will to leaning on the desk, his back to the flames and eyes fixed to the people before him that are the literal reason for why his entire world is attempting to come crashing down around him.

Oh, but wait; he's missing Abigail. Truly, it was her that led to all of this around him?

"Have they done your evaluation?" Dolarhyde asks Will.

Will nods, but his eyes are on Hannibal. "What did you mean?" he asks. Behind him, the fire sears hot, but it's a reminder for him to stay grounded. The longer the quiet sits, the longer he's sure he's done something wrong, but if it's wrong Dolarhyde doesn't seem to realize it. If it's wrong, it's wrong enough not even a powerfully unhinged E-2 can sense it.

"You're full of questions this evening," Hannibal notes.

"Hannibal—"

"It's as I said. You began to rage at me about how I had this edge of sorts over you, how you had a distinct lack of… *tools* …" His lip quirked. "But when you *finally* let go, when you finally allowed yourself to feel something other than the control and restraint you've been subjected to your entire formative life, you were able to so completely and effortlessly weaponize your power that your emotions bled into the Great Red Dragon of all people, and he began to mimic you. You took control of him.

"Not even I can do that," he adds after a beat.

The quiet in the wake of his clipped speech is a heavy kind. It's the same kind as in funeral rooms, when acquaintances are forced to reminisce about distant relatives, the very same as the new girlfriend meeting disapproving parents; it's the same as when Will first dreamed of

another boy's nightmares in school and was able to somehow help him by easing the terror of it.

"And you worry about what I Dreamed into your mind?" Hannibal wonders savagely. His eyes still sit like delighted almonds on his high-cut cheekbones.

Will wants, for a wild moment, to stab them out.

Not my thoughts, think of walls, Will, walls…

Will rubs his bare hands onto his pants, but he's not sure he can scrub away the rush of disgust that roils through him. It's a punch of disbelief, coupled with a trickle of a sick certainty of his capability to be savage, given what he'd done to Agent—

—Mr. Jackson, now. Agent no longer.

Was that truly Dolarhyde's madness clinging to him, or was it his own when he'd encountered the doomed agent in the restroom?

"Tell me about Red Dragon," Dolarhyde cuts in. If Hannibal's words condemn Will in his eyes, it doesn't show. He leans in, and his stare is with the same heated focus as it had been in the hotel. His broken arm rests at stiff, ugly attention.

"What do you want to know?" Will asks. Shame sits with the yolks in the bottoms of his shoes. He wonders what Jack thinks of his lead.

"I've…I've killed s—some… a person, I think." Dolarhyde confesses. His lips slur over the 's', and a hand lifts to cover it. "Each time I lose time, people die."

Will frowns. "Who's hunting the hunter?"

"Purnell." His lip curls. "Agents that work directly under her."

"The Great Red Dragon worked under her until you started asking questions. How are your walls?"

Dolarhyde looks at him the exact same way that he had in the hotel room; his eyes flash with something, a dark and wicked sort of hunger, then it's gone. "I think now you'd be able to Dream me walls. I think they'd be compelling, too." He looks away to the bookshelves whose inhabitants now litter the floor every which way, pages crushed beneath spines that fell with careless, haphazard violence. Something in them stiffens his spine, and his jaw hardens.

"I don't want them anymore, Will Graham. I think the time for my walls are obsolete."

There's a moment where Will immediately looks to Hannibal for his reaction, but he stops himself just in time. There are no safe spaces here. Hannibal is anything but his paddle. "You don't want them, or the Great Red Dragon doesn't want them?"

His nostrils flare. "We are the same."

“If you were the same, then wouldn’t you remember who he murdered before he came here?” Will challenges. “Wouldn’t you remember why he tracked me down?”

“Because We watch the Hunter, Will Graham. The only way to do so is by tracking him down.”

Who watches the watcher? Who hunts the hunter?

“Do you feel protective of him, given all that he’s done?” Hannibal cuts in before Will can fire off the feelings that sit on his tongue. “Given all that you think you’re going to get him to do?”

“Speak for yourself,” Will snaps, and he looks to Dolarhyde. “I’ve had my evaluation, and I passed. Purnell sent someone after me, which means you can’t be here with me.”

“They know,” Dolarhyde replies.

“ *Which means you shouldn’t be here,* ” Will repeats, harder. “I told Jack I had a lead when I came here, so the longer I’m here they’re going to send someone after me. They already think you’re after me.”

“Are you going to continue helping the FBI after everything they’ve done, Will?” Hannibal interjects. His surprise sounds almost human.

Dolarhyde looks at Hannibal, and something in his expression holds enough interest that Will is immediately put on edge. The two of them shouldn’t be alone in a room together. “That’s not a priority to me right now,” he says. His gaze rests on Hannibal’s shoe. “There’s the matter of you.”

“Of me?”

Will scoffs, “If you think I’m going to wait for you to try and kill me, you’re mistaken.”

“I’ve had many opportunities to kill you Will, and I haven’t,” Hannibal reminds him genially.

“If you go back in there, you won’t come out alive,” Dolarhyde cuts in bluntly. “They will kill you and alter the results. You know too much about what they’ve done. With Purnell in charge, that’s how it will always be.”

He believes it, but the alternative is no more promising either. The alternative…

Will’s compelled, for just a moment, to laugh at the sheer irony of the situation, that an E-3 with supposedly unlimited power is stuck between a rock and a hard place. It’s like being in that fucking cabin all over again, only his hands are on Abigail’s throat and he’s remembering just what its’ like to live a life where one never truly seems to have a choice.

He doesn’t laugh; he manages a dusty exhale and a cough, and he buries his face in his hand.

“Then let’s find a way to get to Hannibal’s house,” he suggests into his palm. He scrubs at his scruff and looks at Hannibal with something much akin to violent intent. “Because I’m not

letting you out of my sight now that I know what you are."

Hannibal has the grace not to say anything snarky about it. In the background, the fire pops and cackles at their misfortune.

-

Hannibal doctored Dolarhyde's wound after they safely and discreetly reached his house, and they retreat into the kitchen as he makes a tea that will help with the pain. Will rests with his back to the pantry, his eyes on the killers just in front of him acting for all intents and purposes like something other than killers.

Hannibal's neck has lost some of the redness to it, but there's a tinge of purple to it instead, a darker hue from bruises already forming. Red Dragon's grip had been no joke—he'd truly meant to kill him. Will studies it for longer than he likes before he skips over the not-so-good doctor and studies the room around him, once an intimate space of creativity and now holding something of more sinister intent.

Not for the first time, Will is very much aware of how all it takes is one moment—one second, in truth—to shift an entire perspective. His life of late has felt like nothing but one second after another of turns on turns on turns, and maybe it's now that he truly, *truly* fathoms the twisting halls in the House of Mirrors, the fucking irony of Hannibal being the one to find him and right him.

Now that he has had time and tainted silence to retreat into himself, Will finds himself thinking over the very first time he'd ever eaten something offered from Hannibal Lecter. The salad and the rabbit and the terror.

The meat sometimes tastes like terror.

Hannibal hadn't seemed too offended when he couldn't eat the meat offered, cooked with care. *I can't account for how the hunted behave before they die.* He'd almost seemed more curious and amused, like it was a quaint allergy revealed at a tea party than anything else.

And the *care* he'd showed in escorting him from the *Callumny of Appelles* , like he actually worried at Will's mental space. Will's thinking, and down the halls of his mind behind his walls he's opening doors, retreating farther and farther away. Hannibal's neck will be bruised beyond hiding tomorrow, and he's the one that threw that young woman onto the antlers of a stag just to hear her scream. A choking scream, but musical all the same.

The worst thing, you see, about being an empath is the horrifying burden of imagination that comes with it.

"Are you going to brood all night, or have you thought of a plan?"

It takes a dragging moment for Will to register Hannibal's voice. He looks away from the corner of the refrigerator and fixes his gaze just to his shoulder, unable to truly pull himself much farther past that. "If you've killed Slowinski, then your final goal is Purnell, right?"

Dolarhyde's large, capable hand makes the teacup inside of it fragile and small. He lifts it and sniffs suspiciously at the contents before he sucks it down and grimaces; still hot. "Yes."

"And then?"

"Then?"

"What's your plan after that? Where are you going to go? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go into hiding."

Will's lip curls, and he looks to Dolarhyde's teacup. "Are you going to let *him* continue to kill people? More blackouts?"

"If he said no, would it absolve him of all of the other murders?" Hannibal wonders.

Sometimes the meat tastes like terror.

"I wanted help, and they wouldn't give it, Will Graham." Dolarhyde replies, ignoring Hannibal. "I will help myself now."

Will chews on his bottom lip, watching Hannibal pour Dolarhyde another cup of tea.

"You'll need to go far from here. If not me, someone else. Someone on a tighter leash."

"And what about *you* ?" Dolarhyde challenges. Something about Will's words drags a wan smile to his lips. "Are you also going to go into hiding? Run from them and keep running until you can't anymore?"

"Their hearts race, their eyes widen, and in that final moment their muscles tighten. That was a very terrified rabbit."

"I'm leaving, but where I'm going doesn't concern anyone here. I want that made very clear," says Will. He rests his hands on his hips, hooking his thumbs into his belt. "The only reason we're all in this position is because of the FBI. The way I see it, the farther apart from one another we are, the harder time they'll have finding us, and the higher our survival odds."

Will won't look at Hannibal, but he can hear something smug dripping from his lips as he says, "If you believe the only thing entwining the three of us together is the FBI, you're willfully misinterpreting the evidence just before you."

"Regardless—" Will snaps, glancing to him before looking back to Dolarhyde— "I have to go and call Jack Crawford. I have to pretend that I lost the lead, and by tomorrow we all need to separate."

"That is easily remedied," Dolarhyde replies, and he stands up. His large stature beside Hannibal is a chilling reminder of how easily he could have killed him, and Will manages a glance to his face, as empty as it once had always been.

What Will wouldn't pay to go back to the time when looking at him had only brought silence.

-

I'll call tomorrow with a follow-up.

Will turns his phone off after sending the text, and he looks out of the window rather than look at the man sitting across from him, observing him.

"Do you think if you keep a wakeful vigilance over me in my home, I won't be able to hurt someone?" Hannibal wonders.

Will ignores him, favoring the snowfall outside instead. In the still, awful hours of the night where the air presses too close, Dolarhyde had slipped into the quiet with little ceremony, his splinted arm tucked against his chest. For some reason, Will had almost expected a resistance from him when Will had told him to leave. Back at the office, he hadn't seemed in any place to leave.

"Or did I accidentally allow you to go too far," he muses, more to himself than Will, "lost to the wayward machinations of thought."

"I have nowhere to go," Will says to the snowfall. With the curtains pulled back, frost crawls with a lazy intent around the corners of the panes. "I'm right where you'd like me to be."

"One can be sitting mere feet away and still have travelled too far," Hannibal replies.

There's nothing else, though, that he is able to pry from Will. Silence lingers, and he enjoys a cup of something stronger than the tea he'd given Dolarhyde, a burn to soothe the throat aching from the grips of death.

"When I was small, I saw what it was to be an empath," he says after a time. Will gives no indication that he'd heard, lost among his walls and doors. "My family thought to protect me from being sent somewhere to be tested, to be sold to something before I'd even had the chance to learn what it meant to even be what I was.

"In Lithuania, to not report your child is a death sentence. Naturally, the government has ways of finding out when someone is lying to them."

Hannibal allows that to linger in the air, as though he is a storyteller to a rapt audience.

"Although they could not have said *who* the empathic child was…they could try to figure it out. To force their hand, should they threaten their family. Ironically, the detainers used were always empaths because the government couldn't be sure if the family had taught their child to weaponize their gifts," he muses, and he takes a sip of his wine. Will feels the pressure of his stare on his skin, pushing for entry. "They found out which of us was the empath as easily as if we'd told them ourselves, but by then the damage was done…lines had been crossed, Will. Lines no one truly can forgive.

"They found the empath, but I think that if any one of us could go back to that day, we'd have each done it a little differently."

Will can imagine it, but is that really so surprising? His skin feels over-sensitive despite being cloaked within his own clothing, and he wants to scrub his hands raw despite the fact that they're safely tucked away from the world. Within a slow exhale, he's just as easily imagining what it is to peel the skin away from bone, to feel a sort of fascinating power as the shine of membrane reflects in the light. A fast-running river of thought takes him, and he's opening doors that should be closed, wondering just how long it would take to build his own plots of mycelium in the ground, something that would reach and *know when he was there* .

"The very first time that I weaponized my gift, I didn't kill a single soul," Hannibal continues, reverent.

Will's gaze slides slyly to him, and his lip curls. "I don't believe you."

"I could show you, if you'd like," Hannibal offers, and he leans forward in his chair, gaze fixated now that he has Will's attention. He seems to be painfully aware of how tentative it is, as though he could lose it at any moment to the rushing tide. "Would you like to see?"

"No."

"I think you would," Hannibal replies, quiet. "Because the first time you weaponized your gift, you completely eradicated their entire existence as though they never were, and the second time you assumed control of their very will, their essence with the same effort as it takes to breathe."

"And you wonder why the Academy encourages self-control," Will retorts, only it's half-assed because his horse isn't quite hitched to their post any more than it is to Hannibal's. He's adrift, and he thinks of the times he used to sit in the fields just behind his house, the tall grass high enough to rise up about him like golden waves. The wind would blow, and his house would sit adrift in a sea of sunshine sprouted from the earth; a gust from the other side would bend stalks, bowing to its promise of sanctuary, and then another gust would tumble him under waves again.

"What did it feel like?" Hannibal asks.

Will wants to be sharp, then, and cruel. He can't sense Hannibal's curiosity, but he can see it in the way he leans in, inviting. Will is uncharted territory for Hannibal, too. An E-3, and isn't that curious?

He thinks of his house, standing alone in an ocean of nothing but the earth and the woods and the trees. His lips part, and he can all but see Hannibal cease breathing to catch his words. "Do you think if I describe it easily enough, you can replicate it?"

"I only Dream things, Will; you make them real."

"I wasn't aware I'd even done it, and you want to know what I felt," he mutters. Then, "I felt…I felt a need to build my walls. The Great Red Dragon's emotions were…" God, they *were* , and it was pure vitriol at his back as he tried to keep a battering ram from hitting its mark. "I was imagining my walls, and then I felt him help me keep them that way—well," he tacks on, savagely, "I thought he was helping. But I must have been taking."

“If it’s any consolation, there may have been a point where your emotions overlapping with his made it impossible to distinguish who was giving and who was taking,” Hannibal says, gaze still fixated. A predator who’s caught his prey.

Will would take no such consolations from him. He looks back to the window and the snow adrift to the demanding breeze. “It may have started that way, but it didn’t end that way.”

“And so you remain awake rather than allow yourself to Dream.”

“I’m awake because I don’t trust you not to stab me in the back for knowing too much,” Will retorts.

“Am I the FBI?”

No, worse; he was *curious* .

“You’ve given me your secrets, Will. I’m more than happy to give you mine,” Hannibal offers genially, and he stands, crossing the short distance to hold out his hand. “Haven’t I been forthcoming in the past?”

Will looks at his hand, bare and open with an offering as tempting as it is poisonous. He thinks of the rabbit that just hadn’t hopped fast enough, how everyone loved Hannibal’s cooking and how he maybe may have started out a victim, but he certainly didn’t remain that way.

“I don’t want your secrets any more than I want to give you mine,” Will admits, and he stands up so that he is chest-to-chest with him. Hannibal doesn’t step back to give him room, crowding into his space, and Will thinks his walls high, strong and resilient in the face of someone that slipped something dark and sinister within their depths without telling him.

And with that thought, he slips around him and dismisses himself to instead keep a better vigil within the safety of the guest bedroom.

Will Dreams of bare hands offering Monkshood wrapped in lace. He tastes a rabbit running scared.

-

He calls Jack in the morning, standing in the snow on Hannibal’s back patio. The snow is a wet kind that will turn to an ugly slush that could ice if the temperature drops—Will feels it in the bite of the wind on his nose.

“What was the lead?” Jack asks the moment he picks up. If he knows about Slowinski, he gives no indication.

Will isn’t sure whether to think of that as a good sign or not. “I got to thinking maybe the rogue empath was a fan of the arts. There’s a lot of symbolism in the last piece.”

“So you’re, what—scoping out art galleries?” Jack sounds skeptical, and Will feels the distinct impression of a memory from the drawing on Hannibal’s desk, the one that’d shown

him *everything* .

I wanted to see this painting one last time before I left.

“Just certain art pieces. Certain painters. I didn’t really get much, but…” he lets it linger a second before he exhales a laugh. He’d slept like shit. “I think I just need to stay busy, and maybe I’ll see something.”

There’s something surreal to the idea of talking like this, like he’s truly about to go back to work and pretend to stay busy, like he’s truly about to pretend that everything is okay. He’d passed his evaluation, and wasn’t that something to celebrate?

“If busy is what you’re looking for, then I’ve got something,” says Jack, and he sounds none-too-pleased with it. “Abigail Hobbs has taken off, and no one has a damn clue where she’s off to.”

There are several ways that people respond to shocking news. More often than not there is a certain denial to it because neurotypicals generally hope for the best despite evidence to the contrary. This, though, in the wake of the night prior seems only to confirm something deep in his gut, something he’d wrestled with as he’d tried to fall asleep in the house of a serial killer:

If he was leaving, Abigail had to come, too.

“Can’t make my schedule any busier than it is,” he says dryly, and he squints up to the sky. Looks like freezing rain. Smells like it, too. “I’m on my way.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Monday! Thank you all so, so much for your kind comments! Even with all of the sporadic posting and updates you guys still come back to read this, and I appreciate all of the support and love. :) You have no idea how encouraging that it.

Going forward (and I apologize IMMENSELY for this) you will see a formatting shift in how paragraphs are spaced. Normally, everything comes through for me on Word doc with indents for each paragraph, and I've preferred it that way for (basically) my entire life. The fates that be, though, have determined that my laptop of 7 years is no longer a viable hub for my writing. You'll have seen some updates where things are off occasionally, but I've officially given up! Everything now goes through google drive, and it doesn't format with indents onto Ao3. If this is jarring for ya'll, I apologize for the change towards the END of the story -_-. It's incredibly frustrating for me, but I'm sure it's just as visually annoying for you guys as well.

We are getting towards the final chapters of this fic, so just to recap:

-Finishing up The Unquiet Grave (GOAL: wrapped up by mid-September at the latest)
-Magnum Opus sequel (Beginning around early October)
-Where the Wicked Walk sequel (unknown at this time)

Have a great day! I hope to update soon.

When Thyme Runs Dry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 21:

Finding someone that wants to be found—so long as it's Will looking, of course—is easy. Will traces the spaces Abigail specifically walked through, places where she let her thoughts linger on where she was going, and it ultimately leads him to the dingy bar they now currently hunker down in, splitting a questionable half-price appetizer consisting of poorly pickled artichokes, cheese, and hot oil. When stirred vigorously with a chip, it resembles a dip of sorts, but it's mostly for show.

The waitress wasn't too keen on the minor at first, and only a half-baked excuse about her being too hungry is what granted their booth and short spurts of privacy between her checking-in. He'd Seen a certain sort of bitterness to her being there-like she'd had to pick the shift up. Truthfully, they were the least of her worries, so long as he tipped.

Abigail had, at first, chosen the table in the corner, but a pretty girl is always noticed when they're trying to hide. First it was the waitress by the hostess stand, a frown puckering her lips. Then, the boys lingering with unspoken hopes; Will barely rescued her from what was sure to be an uncomfortable interaction with the waitress who'd given up ruminating on her bitter lot in life in order to fish for some ID, and it thankfully deterred the only guy that'd plucked up just enough courage to take two steps in her direction.

At Will's scowl, those two steps were never again attempted.

"I'm going to pretend you realize the risk you took running like that," Will says once the small group of country boys meander past them to the only pool table in the place. It stinks of rejected hope. The air is muggy despite the cold outside, as though the heater has been sitting in a pile of something wet for some time, and there's an odor to the carpet under their feet. "You're smart, Abigail."

"I was careful."

She was careful, but if she'd left something for Will to pick up on as an empath, it's likely someone else will be able to see it, too. Much the same as all it takes is a Feeler walking into Dr. Lecter's office to know something horrible happened the night before, all it takes is one dragging covetous hands all over Abigail's things to know she's intending to run with no intention to stop.

"You realize the more suspicion you raise, the closer they'll look at you?" he asks. "I may have convinced them that you help me and I help you, but running like this won't change anything for the better."

He doesn't see a point in reassuring her that things won't change at all, seeing as how that's a lie.

She uncomfortable, and it lingers in the set of her mouth. "I had to."

What she doesn't say tells him far more than what she did. Will ponders her eyes on the door, her bottom lip curled into teeth anxious to tear. Another chip makes it to her mouth, but she chews half-heartedly.

"Who threatened you?" he asks lightly.

She gives him the courtesy of not looking surprised, but she takes her time in answering, shoving another chip into her mouth and chewing thoughtfully. Her eyes cut back to the door.

"I'm more dangerous than anything coming through that door right now, Abigail," he says, and behind his walls he can see The Great Red Dragon pacing through the fields beyond his rows of thyme. Farther still, the stag watches, haunches wreathed in feathers singed from the recent flames.

Something doesn't come through the doors, guns drawn and badges flashing, though. It's more innocent than that, and it's a reminder to Will that despite everything, the worst thing that's ever happened to him was, in truth, a neurotypical that didn't know how to leave him the hell alone.

The man that slams his fist onto their table disrupts Will only as long as it takes to look him over; in looking, Will's hit with an honest sense of loathing, and a strange assortment of person that seethes in front of them.

His shoulders sit broad on skinny arms and a bony frame. A boyish face is encased with prison-hair grown long enough to tickle his jaw. It accents an ugly scar at his chin, and it draws attention to his old, haggard eyes. It's there that his age shows, his age and what truly, honestly fuels him.

Anger. Violence. Hunger.

"I know what you are," he seethes, and his breath reeks of soured tequila, "I recognize it. Twitchy, gloved folk. Freaks."

His greasy t-shirt has the cuffs rolled, and there's an unmistakable bald patch of skin, newly healed and shiny from a tested blade cutting too clean. Knife mange; the place where he tests the sharpness of his blade before a fight. Will sees it, and he thinks of Hannibal's observation from the night before, how Hannibal hadn't chastised him outright for taking control of Dolarhyde.

When you finally let go, when you finally allowed yourself to feel something other than control and restraint...

He can Feel the time and repetition of the knife on his skin, how his time is occupied with little more than the thought of fighting, of anger. Will licks his lips. "Leave, now."

“Goverment’s a bunch of fuckin’ liars when they say you freaks actually help us...” he scoffs, and he rocks back on his heels. His lip curls in a sneer. “Get the fuck out of this bar. Your kind ain’t welcome here.”

Abigail opens her mouth, but Will lays a hand over hers and shakes his head. He thinks of the love that went into each and every fight, and it was a simple habit, nothing more in the fact that guy happens to test the same spot each time. Habit.

But it’s a vulnerability, and as a neurotypical it’s glaringly obvious to someone like Will.

“Get out,” Will repeats, and it’s a puzzling phrase to him because really, in the grand scheme of things, that’s all he’d like to do; get out of this mess and disappear, find a way to ensure nothing and no one was able to track him down, lost to the many moving parts of the world as just another invisible piece.

“Yeah, you fucking deaf, too? No one wants your kind lurking here and making a mess, poking your nose in shit.”

“You know, it’s funny you say that,” Will replies, and maybe it’s his tone of voice but the guy goes still. Prison-instinct. “Bunch of fucking freaks with their freaky powers, and you think it’s a good idea to piss ‘em off? You think the government’s shelling out a conspiracy, but you’re brave enough to piss ‘em off and try and run them out of a bar?”

The man hesitates, and he seems to sense something. Even normal folks have a sixth sense that reaches deep and tells them when something’s just not right. He opens his mouth to speak, but Will’s smile seems to take something out of it, and his mouth gapes just slightly.

It’s quiet near their side of the bar. Really quiet. “You also got some fucking freaky powers,” Will asks, a dangerous curiosity in his voice, “or you think you’re just one lucky son-of-a-bitch to piss one off and get away with it?”

The silence spreads, and Abigail is busy stirring the chip in the bowl and taking a bite, likely to make herself appear braver than she feels. Will feels something, although he can’t call it bravery. Angry recklessness. A certain thirst for violence.

You’re weaponizing your gift in a public space because Hannibal made it sound nice.

He blinks, and the terror in the guy in front of him is finally more palpable than the ignorant fury. Something in Will seems to have finally reached him, struck a cord deep enough to leave him shuddering in the aftermath. Will is at once ashamed, but it’s a curious kind because there’s a brief rush of endorphins, something like pride in a job well done, and he’s left with a muddled sense of pleasure that sours quick in the back of his throat.

“I’m sorry, I-”

“Get the fuck away from us,” Will snaps, and he drags his traitorously hungry eyes away from the man before him, glaring at his glass of water. He shouldn’t have done that.

The man stumbles away, in a daze, and Abigail ruminates in the gloom after, a knowing expression in her eyes that Will pointedly ignores.

“What I have to tell you doesn’t feel nearly as heavy as what you need to tell me,” she says. “The last time I saw you, you couldn’t do that.”

He’s not sure if she’s afraid. She’s almost as good at walls as Hannibal is. “I...I didn’t know how.”

“You’re a fast learner,” she shoots back. Maybe a little fear that time.

“And with a stunt like that, we’re memorable now. We need to go, and you need to explain why you thought it was a good idea to even come here.”

“We leave now and we’re more memorable.”

She has a point, and Will returns her steady gaze, although it’s a curious kind because as two empaths they truly find their gaze fixating to the other’s nose. In the corner, the boys go back to their game, disinterested in her completely now that she’d been revealed. A freak. A girl like that could take their secrets, and wasn’t that what made empaths so terrible, what made it so agonizing to be loved by one? That they could take a secret and make it theirs?

He thinks of how his empathy was so acute he felt sorrow for the man that’d placed mirrors over the eyes of Mrs. Perkins before he fucked her, and he wonders if they know the honest meaning of agony.

“There was a letter waiting for me,” she begins, and it’s a reprieve from the thoughts in his head, how they press to his walls and beg entrance.

What the fuck did you put in my head, Hannibal?

“From who?”

She bites her lip, and the the blood rushes from the pressure, the area a bright white. A little harder, and she’ll break skin. After a breath, she lets go and looks down. “It was...it was from my dad.”

“Your dad.”

“It must have been in his file or something, but it revealed...things.”

“Things,” Will prompts when she doesn’t continue. He glances to his watch, wonders just how long they have before Jack calls for an update. How long he has before Hannibal decides to not simply slip out of town and never be seen again.

She surprises him when lays her hand, palm out, on the table beside the crunched napkins and a stray chip. “It’s easier if I show you,” she says, and her hesitance is meant more for him than her, he knows. Abigail is used to the trading of secrets through looks and side-eyes and dreaming. This would be nothing for her

He's come this far though, hasn't he?

He takes one of his gloves off and touches his palm to hers, and suddenly he's Feeling the paper in his hands, the letter left prim and neat as you please on her bed. There was something to be said for an empath that'd been trained from a young age to truly utilize their gift. The moment his palm touches hers, the memory is there, neatly stored with all but a bow tied on top. Nothing clutters the way and presses to the corners of his mind, and nothing sends him falling into that place that people never truly crawl out of.

Will blinks, and he's in his hospital room, reading the letter that steadily begins to shake the farther along he goes, spellbound by the horror of it all, the horror and the sinking realization that he should have never gotten comfortable, should have never trusted that he'd be safe.

My evaluator told me to write a letter to myself and seal it. They said to put all of my regrets and secrets inside so that I had a safe place for them, and that's what I'd Dream up whenever I had to put the bad secrets away.

If I write it here, though, they'll read it. They'll read it, and then they'll know my secrets. They have everything else, but now this? Now even my secrets aren't secret? I Dream them away, and even sometimes I can't find just what it is I'm looking for when I stumble across it later. How secret are secrets when they're not kept? If I Dream them away so even I may forget them, can they forget them, too?

There's only one who knows my secrets. But can two truly keep a secret without at least one of them lying dead?

I don't suppose it's possible. Not really.

He blinks again, and she's shut him off from feeling her crumple to the floor to sob only long enough to think of a plan to run away. It's a smooth transition that leaves his hand tingling, and he pulls it back and rubs it onto the side of his leg before he tugs his glove back on, breath cutting short.

"It could be fake."

"Even if it was, it doesn't change the contents and what it reveals," Will replies.

Abigail nods resolutely. She'd likely expected that. "What do we do?"

They have to run. She's in danger, and if she's in danger than surely he is too because are they not one in the same? Are they not held together by the same terrors, the same death and the same flesh and blood? He sometimes still woke up feeling like they were dying all over again, his walls crumpling no matter how desperately he tried to lift them against the feeling of his throat parting so easily, so easily to the knife her father used to gut deer.

"They know," he says miserably. Then, "we have to go."

“Where did it come from?” she whispers, and her voice trembles. “Have they known all along? How could...how could they have known?”

“I didn’t see that from his final evaluation file, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t write it.” Will flags down their waitress and fishes his wallet out. “Director Purnell could have had Agent Dolarhyde pull that for his personal investigation before he ran and I was sent after him.”

“Why would she...why show me this now, then?” she hisses.

The waitress sets the check down preemptively with a thin smile. She’d also overheard his words with the guy before. Fucking freaks with their fucking freaky powers. He can See the derision in the lines of her face. Will tosses down a couple of bills and pushes them back to her before they’re standing and heading towards the door, his steps in sync with the steady and insistent beating in the hollow of his neck.

“To lure you out, and she succeeded,” he replies, calmer than he feels. “Which means we have to go, now,” he urges, lowering his voice but not his insistence.

They step out into the icy cold, and he’d been right earlier that day, pacing along the snow on Hannibal’s back porch. The wet snow had hardened to an icy layer that made steps more than a little difficult to navigate. There was a wetness to the air that left lungs resentful on the inhale. His stomach clenches. He wonders if Hannibal has run yet.

The car pulls out from the curb, and he has a wild thought to call him, even just to ask. He stifles it, along with the rush of bitter anger that once again he’d opened himself up to something only to have it devour him from the inside out. His knuckles aren’t white on the steering wheel, but fingers are twitchy on the heat dials.

“Why would she want to lure me out?” Abigail asks when she’s brave enough. There’s no music playing on the radio, and the air chafes.

He can’t quite bring himself to stop fiddling with the fucking heat dials to fix that, though.

“Either to kill you or to kill me,” Will retorts. “Or both. She’d know what happened, what...bonded us. Jack sent me after you, which makes me figure we can’t trust him. We need to put distance between us and them before they start looking in earnest when I don’t report back.”

The bag she’d packed, laden with clothing she’d been given as gifts from Alanna, rests in her lap, a barrier between her and the road ahead. “And then?” she asks, a tremor working its way through her voice.

“I’m trying to get to that part,” he hedges. “I wasn’t expecting the need for a back-up plan like this when I first set out to find you today.”

“What I saw in that bar makes me think you don’t need much of a back-up plan,” she snaps. It’s more defensive than cruel, in truth.

Her fear is beginning to spread into the car, and without thinking he stops touching the dials on the heater to snag her hand. “Every trick in the book I could learn can’t stop a bullet that’s already been fired,” he explains, and his tone softens. “I’m not angry at you.”

“You’re angry at my secrets,” she sneers, but she holds onto his hand tightly, for dear life.

“Just as angry as I am at my own.”

“Starting a collection?”

He smiles grimly, and he has the urge to ask what she’d think of him kissing Hannibal. Another secret. “You don’t have to be afraid I’ll use it against you like your father did.”

“I’m not.”

“It only feels that way, got it.”

She can’t argue that, so she doesn’t. Instead, she slumps into the door to press her forehead against the cold window. Will goes back to fiddling with the heat dials before he finally finds whatever it is his jittery hands are looking for.

His lights hit bright on the snow plowed to either side of the interstate, the sky having taken on an overcast, heavyset nature that promised more of...something. It’s then that he finally turns the radio on, something to accompany him as Abigail stews in her own miserable guilt. If it snowed, they’d have a hell of a time, but they’d manage. If it turned to hail, or if it decided to finally blizzard...

He decides he’ll listen to the weather for awhile, if that was alright with everyone else.

Ten minutes in, Abigail goes back to holding his hand. He doesn’t draw attention to the occasional, furious swipe of her hand across her cheek to hide the wetness.

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They hit a few gas stations, make it farther out into the winding roads and highways that connect to interstates. She sleeps, he drinks coffee with gloved hands. They jitter, they shake, and the snow falls steadily with wicked intent. Thank god the windshield wipers work.

State lines pass, and Abigail notes it by lifting her feet as they cross. By nine, the interstate is a long ribbon of black, as dangerous as it is shiny under the ripe moon. He’s left his phone somewhere along the way, and scattered among Jack’s steadily climbing missed calls there’s one from Hannibal. Will had eyeballed it awhile before he let it go to voicemail.

Back road highways wind, and he fishtails more than a few times. Ice teases the tires, and he’s thankful traffic isn’t bad. He considers pulling over, but pulling over means potentially getting caught, and he’s less keen on Purnell finding them.

He isn’t sure if it’s the idea of them finding Abigail that has him so afraid, or if it’s the fear he’d enjoy what he’d do to them if they did.

He thinks his walls high, though, despite the headache that builds. He smells thyme rather than rotting flesh, and when the weather advisory finally promises an end to the snow, he changes the channel to jazz. A few more hours. Another state line.

He's starts to get tired by midnight, but he's in no position to stop. The glasses are abandoned for concentration, and when the frost starts to creep at the edges of the window, he finds himself fiddling with the heat dials again.

Maybe that's why he doesn't notice the SUV until its lights blindside his left just an inhale before impact.

Abigail's scream makes his ears ring, or maybe it's from the sound of the screeching metal that makes his ears want to bleed; they're spinning and spinning and spinning, and he thinks there's something wrong with his shoulder because it's burning and he can't quite catch his breath as he's thrown against the seatbelt that cuts into his neck.

It's all too fast, images bleeding together for the briefest of seconds before they hit something, hard. His ears are still ringing, and Abigail's sobbing in breaths. So fast, and what had he told Abigail? He couldn't stop a bullet once it was fired? His shoulder is on fire, weird pulsing tendrils of pain that flash down and then up. He fumbles for the seatbelt with his right hand, but it takes too long and sits limp in his lap as he finally disconnects it. Likely the mechanism is busted.

The snow falls, and the moon sits fat. Will's vision steadies, although the edges pulse with each heartbeat, red. Everything hurts. But that's what Hannibal wanted, right? That's why he did what he did, because to ever truly be sure one was alive, one must endure what it is to feel the barest of kisses of death at their lips. The body responds to stimulus. The body responds.

"Stay in here," he rasps, and he kicks his crumpled door until it opens just enough for him to get out. It's a stumble to right himself before falling on his face, and it confirms what he'd feared about his shoulder. Dislocated.

The cold air stings the cuts on his cheeks, and the harsh light of the SUV makes his eyes water. The front end is crumpled in, but the fucking lights burn on with feeling. Shadows and a gaping abyss swallow the space behind it, invisible in the high-beams.

"Hands where we can see them, Agent Graham!"

From behind the battering ram of a car, two agents rush forward with their guns drawn. Will smiles in something more like a grimace, and he lifts his good hand. "You dislocated my shoulder," he calls out. His tongue tastes like thyme.

His headache seems to almost tremble, and he's hit with such a force of pain centered just at his temples that he's forced to his knees. His eyes water, and his can't stop stop the small whimper as his vision flickers white for a moment before going back to normal. He thinks walls high, walls high, walls high...

Can you see?

“Enough, I need to read him his sentence first.”

The headache eases as quickly as it came, and he slumps forward, peering through the lights casting odd shadows to the snowfall. That is what made people fear empaths, that ability to wrap their emotions into a weapon of power that’d left his ears ringing--or was that from the wreck? Abigail’s screaming?

Purnell comes from around the SUV, and he’s never felt more of a gut punch at the reality of what was about to happen, how it’d come to this so easily and so...fast.

He wonders if all RA’s feel like this, in the end. How many of them had he made feel like this?

You don’t help them. You hunt them.

“Agent Graham, you have surprised me,” she begins. Her pinched, narrow face is pale in the brilliant light. Her pantsuit is hidden by a large, woolen coat. “To think you’d let the FBI gain a reputation like this, should the public find out.”

“Happy to oblige,” he says. “I’d like to file a complaint for hostile conduct from a superior. You dislocated my shoulder, director.”

The sharp, piercing headache makes him crumple with a cry, and he lays there, dazed in the aftermath as it fades. He can’t quite Dream something, can’t quite See from the brightness of the light, and when he’s hauled to his feet he can’t stop the shout from the wrenching agony in his shoulder. It’s slipping, slipping, and what had he told Abigail? What had he told her?

He hopes she’s running right now. Running and running and not looking back. His head is spinning, and the walls are smooth on his palms as he presses them there. Awed, he’d once been. How had they gotten so sturdy?

“Your evaluation showed that you love the FBI,” she continues. “You wouldn’t want to hinder its ability to help people, would you?”

“We don’t help them, Kade, we hunt them,” he manages when the spinning stops.

“I can’t get in, ma’am,” the agent on the left murmurs.

As if to punctuate that fact, another stab of pain ensures he doesn’t get back up from where he lay in the aftermath, the snow soaking into his hair. The stag watches, but didn’t it always watch? It did nothing, came from nothing, but still it watched, and it’s outside of his walls in the ashen fields to witness his final moments, and aren’t they just pathetic?

He’s helped to his feet with the same care as before. His vision wavers as he tries to grab onto anything, anything; the headache keeps him from concentrating long enough to Feel anything more than his own pain.

Was this how he made RA’s feel in their final moments? Such agony?

“Agent Graham, for crimes against the FBI and crimes against the nation; for weaponizing your gift and harming innocent citizens of the United States of America, you are hereby retired from service.” Her face is grim, but even in the light he can see the triumph, the gloating at his pain. Neurotypicals love to see someone suffer from a safe distance. Flanked by other empaths, she must feel pretty powerful to be the one holding the leash.

The gun is no colder than the air as it’s pressed to his temple, and he can’t quite grasp the Dream that they’ll quite make it through this, and the tar’s rising fast and high and he’s going to drown to death in it after all. He and the boy are are going to die in the tar after all.

He tastes Dolarhyde just before he hears the gun fire.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Monday! I am already halfway through the next chapter, and with this week being my first official vacation since my new job, I've got all the time in the world to have it posted soon!! Thank you all so much for your patience, and thank you so much for the love and support you give to me and my writing. Every comment, every kudos, every hit is so much appreciated. :)

For those that are new to the fandom and have found their way to this, welcome!! This is an amazing fandom, and the people here are amazing. There are no rude because we eat the rude. ;)

Have a fantastic day. I'm vacationing in Tennessee and hope to gain some inspiration and a muse in my adventures for writing!

Where the Dragon Roams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 22:

Blood spatters across Will's face, and it's warm on his tongue. The grip digging into his left arm stiffens, then suddenly goes slack, and it’s true what they say--you can see the light leave someone's eyes when they die.

Can you see?

Will stares, and he’s Seeing it, his headache dissolving like a tissue paper to water in the wake of death in all its cold, slick embrace. It is the void. It is nothingness, and isn’t that what he did to Agent Jackson, afraid as he begged him to forget it all? A living void? A living, dead place where things may go but never return?

The empath's blood is warm on Will’s cheek. The tip of his nose burns cold.

“What in the--”

Another shot, and the agent just beside Purnell drops with the beautiful precision of someone trained to kill and kill well. But of course he was, wasn't he? The Great Red Dragon was made to protect, cultivated into a cruel rage until all he knew was carnage and violence. Much like the children in the Perkins’ home, the agents were not the target. The agents were nothing.

Can you see?

Slowinski was dead. Purnell was next.

Purnell tries to draw her gun, but Red Dragon’s emotions are a palpable thing, rippling through his voice and cresting with the wave of his cruelty as he snarls from somewhere behind Will, “if you draw that, you will put it to your head and die.”

And isn’t that what they all do, in truth? Die? Will’s staring at the agent’s wide and glassy eyes, slumped in a ragdoll fashion to the snowy pavement. The light's gone, snuffed, removed, and the blood's warm on skin that's ready to rot.

He’s not aware of his shaking until he’s startled by Red Dragon’s touch, the jolt enough that his teeth chatter together as his jaw clenches and he's forced from that bleak place, that void that takes us all. “We’re even now,” Red Dragon says, and the words seem to cut through the cold of the shock that’d left Will’s feet entirely numb, made him feel like he was shutting down. Shock, he distantly recalls. Something like shock.

The Great Red Dragon stalks past, poised to devour, and the rage that permeates off of him seems to shake the rest of the cobwebs clinging to Will that are just begging him to die

already. His splinted arm is lost amidst the thick winter coat, dark enough to blend into the shadows as he waited to strike.

"Agent Dolarhyde--"

“The best Dreamers know how to make the dreams so real they hurt,” he snarls.

“Did that happen to you? Did someone dream the pain?”

Purnell goes still at the gutteral, visceral voice. Had she never seen her own beast unleashed? Had she only ever seen the dragon calm, poised and prepared? Will had pressed palms to his violence, tasted it in the air and felt it rippling off of his skin. This was more familiar to him than the man that'd taken a chloroform rag to his face just to warn him he was being watched. This was his dreams, his nightmares, the shadow that stalked the crevices of his mind and lingered long after the rest of him had finally fallen to sleep. This was the placer of mirrors, the Becomer.

"Run, run as fast as you can..." he taunts and tilts his head. "Did you think you could run forever, Kade?"

"Everything that I have done has been for the safety and security of this great nation," Kade replies. To her credit, her voice doesn't shake nearly as much as her legs do. Her voice is calm in what is quickly unraveling to her own Becoming.

"Even the parts where you willfully tear down the walls of the human mind, sunder foundations and wake monsters from their sleep?" he asks, deceptively soft.

"You are an anomaly, not human."

She lunges for the gun at her feet, the one dropped when Red Dragon removed the obstacles in his path with quick bullets to the brain. Red Dragon lets out a roar, something horrible in of itself because the hair on the back of Will's neck rises, and what had she just said? He wasn't human?

He takes her to the ground, and all the training in the world couldn't have prepared Kade for the indescribable power of an empath whose walls were not only down but obliterated. It's not a ripple that spreads to a wave the way Will sometimes feels emotions; it's ichorous, thick and bubbling, A geyser that all but explodes, first up then out and Will thinks his walls high because surely this won't take him under the way it has her, will it? Surely he won't be swept away?

Surely, but; how does one protect themselves when the poison has already made it inside the walls?

What did you put in my head, Hannibal?

He inhales, and for a moment he's taken to another place, another time. He sinks into the sick black that he'd once saved someone else from drowning within, as familiar as a distant

nightmare, both feared just recognized with the same trepidation of a willfully lost friend. An echo of a dream of a dream that was never truly his, was it?

Will clapped his hands over his ears like he could deafen the sounds of sobbing that echoed inside of his mind. It was near-overwhelming as he felt for the Dreamer whose dreams had fallen away from him. It wasn't hard to find the darkness that spread, a tar-like ichor whose thickness was fast enveloping the boy that cried and fought to be free. As Will's walls lay flat around him, he saw within his mind's eye the struggle, the fear as someone reached, reached, reached and god why did loving her hurt so much?

He blinks, and there's a brief moment where he can see the dorm room wall separating him and the boy that cried, the boy that he never told the Academy about.. He blinks again, and Kade's face is pressed to the snow, a knee in her back with arms wrenched sharply up. Red Dragon had made Hannibal look small, but compared to Kade he is a giant, her two hands dwarfed in his one. She's struggling, voice muffled, back arching, but what can she do in the wake of whatever Dream Red Dragon is unfolding in her mind? Just what could someone like her hope to do?

"Agent Graham!" she manages, face half-out of the snow, but it's unclear if it's a cry for help or a cry of damnation. The words are barely out of her mouth before her eyes roll into the back of her head, and she's dragged into the ichor.

Will stares, and when Red Dragon looks up to him, he Sees. In Seeing, there is a dizzying instance where he can see himself through Red Dragon's eyes, a haze of fury that makes the world appear in shades of pulsing red. Through Red Dragon's eyes, he doesn't seem so weak as he does through his own eyes. Through Red Dragon's eyes, Will appears purposeful. Determined. He stands, resolute, although his eyes burn with something that is hard to place.

"You don't want to stop me," Red Dragon says, and the words are small but still somehow too big for the short distance between them.

The snow falls, quieter than the body that lays beside him. "I don't," he agrees hoarsely.

"You don't think it's right, though."

"The right thing isn't always the best thing."

"I want her to Become," Red Dragon explains. "Is Becoming so bad?"

Will swallows so hard it leaves a fist in his throat that drags slow and gets stuck. The tip of his nose is on fire from the cold. "Sometimes," he says.

"Dr. Lecter helped you become." Red Dragon blinks slow. "I can See it."

What did you put in my head?

"Unwillingly," he admits.

"If it doesn't challenge you, it won't change you."

Will has a wild image of the support groups, circled-up and supportive of one another's mental failings. He wonders if Director Hanson was one of the ones rooting for him, or if they couldn't wait to watch him fall, too.

"Changing her won't change what she's done," he says, only it's hollow and tinny, even in his own ears.

Red Dragon can hear it, too. His smile is crooked, slow and sure with the cleft hiking it up at just the right angle to look like a snarl. "But it will keep her from Changing anyone else."

"The best Dreamers know how to make the dreams so real they hurt."

Red Dragon grabs her by the back of her short hair and wrenches her head back, hard Her arms drop to the snow, listless. Her eyes are screwed shut, but whatever Dream he's unveiling makes them open wide, and the the moonlight drowns the color from them, leaving them a milky white.

"The best Dreamers know how to make the dreams so real they hurt," he says, and it sounds somehow reverent, like taking sacrament.

Will closes his eyes, tight.

There is no noise to the end of Kade Purnell. The snow falls with the kind of quiet that's heavier than it is, like it's covering their secrets. It's only when he hears movement that he risks opening them, and nothing the horrible, dark crevices of his mind conjured could have created such a reality.

Kade Purnell, eyes white and full as the moon, rose and turned to the road. Her movements were smooth and fluid, with no hesitation. Though her pistol rests in its holster, she makes no move for it as she begins to walk into the night. The shadows don't swallow her so much as the falling snow seems to lull her in, and past the cars she walks, onto powdered white road where her steps would be covered in minutes.

Will watches her walk away, and he makes no move to stop her. The snowfall muffles the sound of her steps.

"For your kindness," Red Dragon says in the quiet that follows.

Will pulls his gaze away from where he can no longer see her, the lights from the SUV glaring. "What did you dream for her?" he wonders.

"A never ending road." He walks closer to Will, pauses when he notices the visible tensing. His head cants, sharp eyes assessing. "She knows she chose to walk it."

"She chose it," Will scoffs, soft.

"She knows she chose it, just like she knows that choosing to stop walking on it means she will accept that she will die."

Will doesn't say anything as he comes closer. His broad frame blots out the burning headlights, and when he reaches to grasp Will's shoulder, he makes no move to stop him. The splint from his broken arm digs into his collarbone, but it in no way compares to the fire that ripples then explodes as Red Dragon forces his shoulder back into place with a quick twist and a firm push.

He lets out a shout that fizzles to a wheeze, falling into the shoulder just in front of him as Red Dragon's palm presses flat against the side of his arm, putting pressure on the shoulder newly rejoined. It hurts, much like dipping his arm into the icy river, needles of pain that spit and hiss. It's better than a gunshot to the head, though, better than a shallow grave on the side of the road after Purnell's men were through with him. His eyes water, and he blinks back tears that would likely freeze to his cheeks.

"What...happens if she chooses to stop walking?" he asks hoarsely, needing the distraction.

"Then she will take the gun out of her holster and shoot herself," he replies. There is a disarmingly hungry way he speaks, as though he wished he could see it. "She will Dream it as a gunshot from afar, from someone that watches but does not reveal themselves."

"She knows that will happen?"

"She knows...it's her worst fear. To not see the one that kills her in the end." He steps back after he's sure Will won't fall, and his expression twists.

"And you've ensured she'll die by her own hand."

"She chose this," Red Dragon reminds him.

Will isn't so sure that's true, but standing beside the cooling body of the empath that was prepared to murder him, it's hard to find an argument as to why. He can't feel his nose anymore. He's not sure if it's because he's used to the cold, or if his shoulder just hurts too damn much to notice.

"Thank you," he says, even though it sounds odd being directed at the Great Red Dragon of all people.

"I should thank you," he rumbles, and there is a terrible thing about his smile. It's sly and cunning and no wonder Dolarhyde's dark imagination unfolded such a creation, lost to whatever horrors he'd been subjected to as a child. "You never told the Academy about me."

"I didn't know that there was something to tell," Will says, and it's partly true but partly a dirty old lie he'd told himself for a long time.

“Did that happen to you?” Will couldn't help but ask. “Did someone Dream the pain?”

“Yes.”

“Are they still here?” Will wondered. He stomped down his own trickle of fear.

“No,” the boy assured him, and wide eyes looked from the moon in order to pierce Will with his glazed stare. “No. I Dreamed that they died, then they did.”

"You knew something, Will Graham," he says coyly. Knowingly.

"...I knew something," Will agrees. "I knew you were scared."

"You were scared, too. You don't seem so scared right now."

Despite standing across from something capable of burning his safe spaces to the ground, he doesn't feel so scared now that he knows Kade Purnell is currently walking her way to death.

"You just wanted to be Seen," Will explains.

"No, *he* did. Until it endangered him, I was fine with my work."

Will thinks of Hannibal then, and he wonders if there was ever a moment he'd have considered stopping, should he have realized just how much danger it was putting Will in at the EBAU.

I was curious.

...Probably not.

"I See you now, though."

"You've always seen me, Will Graham. You were just too afraid to admit it." He looks over Will's shoulder, then back. "You have something to protect."

He nods, slow. "I...I have to go."

Red Dragon nods. "Your walls are high. I think if you're careful, you'll survive."

"You'll be found if you don't let him build them back," Will warns.

"I am not what you have to protect," he rumbles in reply.

He's not sure if it should really be ending like this, his walking away and allowing Red Dragon to slip into the night. Would there be more murder, more death? Would Will's hands also bear the marks of nails digging into unsuspecting flesh while watching the headlines as bodies stacked and minds were sundered? Would Jack Crawford blame him for all of the deaths, too?

"Your walls are high," he says again, and he sounds almost proud. "None of those agents could read you in the end."

Will looks up at him again, and he manages to look into his eyes. There is no falling in. There are no doors. Red Dragon is as much closed off now as Will feels. "...The headaches?"

Red Dragon nods. "If you feel them, someone is closeby. Someone that means harm."

He'd felt it in Hannibal's office. Had Hannibal meant harm? Or had Hannibal meant only to try and see?

He doesn't want to think about Hannibal right now. One thing at a time.

"What are you going to do with the bodies?"

Red Dragon looks at them, and a snarl ripples along his lips. "Don't worry about them, Will Graham."

It's advice as much as it is a warning, something predatory. They exchange something much like a look, and Will turns at the same time as he does, trudging back to the car that looked as though its driver side had been hit with a battering ram.

Abigail, blessedly okay, sits in the passenger seat with her hands clapped over her mouth. She had seen everything.

The engine turns over, although cold seeps through the seats and lodges in his bones. "We'll swap cars soon," he says. This one would would surely be memorable, now that there was a giant dent in the side.

He pulls back onto the road, but neither Dolarhyde or the Great Red Dragon are in sight. The intact SUV is gone, too. The night had swallowed them up, and the snow is starting to fall harder. The weather man was wrong.

It's not until they get a little down the road that Abigail begins to cry, more out of relief than anything else. Will holds her hand and wonders at the his walls, how even the Great Red Dragon had been able to see them.

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Hannibal finds them at a sketchy Motel-8 whose manager allowed an extra fifty in his pocket to keep from registering Will's name on the books. Will had given Abigail the bed farthest from the door, and only bad late night television coupled with the adrenaline finally fading from his body allowed him to lay down. He'd dazed restlessly in short spurts until he'd come to with a start around 3:32 a.m., heart pounding.

If he could Feel Hannibal in the air, it was because he wanted to be found.

He's not sure why, but he snags the first weapon he sees as he follows the sidewalk towards the vending machines. A stack of linoleum rests under heavy gobs of plastic, the cutter's handle barely seen among the folded tarp. He pockets it, and when he comes to a stop in front of the candy bar machine, his body is tense despite aching all over from the wreck.

There is no candy bar abandoned at the bottom, but then again the vending machine sits outside and people are desperate in the winter. He feeds it the five in his pocket and chooses the trail mix, unsurprised when the gear gets stuck and it takes the price of two to be awarded with one. A third attempt rewards him with three, and he stuffs the extras into his coat for later.

"Lost in your thoughts?" Hannibal asks, stepping up just beside him.

"I imagine that happens, given the way a Dreamer thinks," Will echoes their conversation that feels like it'd happened eons before, and he doesn't turn to look at him. The linoleum knife sits in his pocket, accusing and tempting.

"You've seen a far less tasty side of the world this night."

"I built forts," Will says.

"You did," Hannibal agrees, and he sounds almost proud. "I had to follow Francis Dolarhyde to find you."

"And now that you've found me?" Will challenges softly. "What have you planned for this reunion?"

There's enough venom in his voice that Hannibal catches onto it remarkably quick. Will can feel him tense ever-so-slightly. "What do you have planned for this reunion, Will?" he wonders.

The flickering, dull bulb doesn't make the knife glint, but it's enough that it gives Will the sort of distraction he needs. Hannibal moves to block his lunge, and in that breath, that pause as he moves to self-preserve, Will finds the crack in Hannibal Lecter's wall that makes him seem so fucking normal and obliterates it, his bare hand shoving Hannibal back against the brick wall of the motel, hard.

The knife presses taut against his coat, and Will slides his hand to the monster's neck, firm but not squeezing. In the shadows, his dark eyes gleam like pinpricks. Will moves closer to better See them.

"Got you," he breathes, and he is not within the mind of a neurotypical as he walks in, but a palace, gleaming pillars of marble and halls polished to a sheen. His steps echo as he turns to take everything in.

"Are you going to kill me?" Hannibal wonders beside him.

"You said that I have a pure, kind idealogy, Dr. Lecter," Will replies. He walks down the hall with purpose, steps unhesitating. "You tell me my intentions."

"Your empathy is a two-sided blade. As much as you may wield it to help people, you have every capacity to hurt them, too."

As if to punctuate that, Will applies just a tad more pressure on the blade.

"You asked me to help you once, and I did," Hannibal says, and he keeps pace. There is no sense of malice, no attempt at violence within the opulent walls of his mind where they walk. "Are you upset that I helped in the only way that I know how?"

There is something that tickles just on the edge of Will's thought that sounds an awful lot like begging for help, the warmth of a wardrobe that encloses them and keeps their secrets. He

pauses outside of the door that conjured those feelings, and he stands there for some time, staring.

"Just what is it you're looking for, I wonder?" Hannibal muses.

"Your empathy," Will replies, and he grasps the handle of the door and strides into the memory.

The wardrobe is cramped, and every inch of Hannibal is alive to the man pressed against him, the tang of his sweat strong in his nose. It's better than the insufferable aftershave, something that lends itself a true insight to Will Graham. His emotions shudder off of him with each tremble, and it's tangible in the air that his fear isn't just for him.

Hannibal's curiosity only grows in knowing that Will Graham's curiosity has--somewhere along the way--shifted to something more like concern and attachment. Affection. Hungry hands on his books, wanting to peer behind the veil that Hannibal had so carefully made.

"Will, what is happening?" Hannibal murmurs, and he gentles his voice to the sort of calm that could spread if the E-3 would only let it.

"Shh," Will urges, utterly afraid.

Just down the hall, there is the muted click of the latch on the door catching. The dogs let out wild, whooping barks, and Hannibal wonders just how bold he'd have to be to kill whomever had entered the home, should they hurt the dogs. Innocent things, and Will's connection to them were Dreamed into the very walls of his home.

It's only mildly unsettling that Hannibal has no doubts he'd happily take the risk. Should the need arise, of course.

"Will-"

"Please, Hannibal," he hisses, and he dips his head to press it into the curve of Hannibal's shoulder. "Please...be quiet."

Hannibal can see the Dream unfolding around them, Will's need to be unseen and unheard. Afraid, his empathy bleeds from his pores, damning in how he can't hide should it ooze from the cracks of the wardrobe. He'll surely be seen if it is an empath, and what should happen if the ignorantly-powerful E-3 crippled them in the wake of his need to be unseen? Will's heart rages against his ribs, and Hannibal feels it beside his own, needful. Without hesitation, he wraps his arms around him to help cultivate that Dream, to quiet it so that they may truly hide away in quiet.

Gloved, Hannibal presses his palm to the flat of Will's back and holds him close, resisting the urge to dip his nose into his hair and breathe. He thinks of the guilt, the ugly guilt Will had had in reading his notes on him, how much surprise and poignant pleasure he'd gained in seeing Hannibal's own impressions on paper. Someone so touch-starved as to feel guilt in feeling, and it had occurred to Hannibal several times that there was something romantically tragic to think the only skin Will had placed palms to for years belonged to the dead.

Will clings to him tightly, and Hannibal longs to place a palm to his neck to feel his pulse begging reprieve. Instead, when a loose floorboard betrays their intruder, he lifts palms to his cheeks and turns his mind away from how close they dance with something more than a fight, should Will's fear have any sound footing.

Given what Hannibal's observed, he's willing to see this through.

He wonders what Dreams he'd be able to steal if he got to see Will react to bare palms on his skin, intimate and revealing. It was truly Feelers that Hannibal couldn't hide away from, something real and tangible about skin that Dreams couldn't hide. Dreams were only dreams, after all, and Will's skin would feel him in a way no one else ever had.

It occurs to him, as he brushes thumbs along his cheekbones, that his own curiosity must have shifted somewhere along the way, as well. He wonders just what it would take for Will to See him the way he is trying to See Will.

The stranger departs, and Will falls against him, relief a palpable thing. Walls are easy, though, easier than breath because that is all he has ever known, those walls, and just as before he's the neurotypical that Will Graham has always known him to be, the same one as anyone else would see.

Only Will Graham was clever, and how desperately he was trying to scale the walls to find the man behind them.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will let's go of him. "What's going on?"

"...I need your help, Dr. Lecter." His voice cracks, and his jaw clenches in the dark. "...I really need your help.

Will drops the linoleum knife, but he doesn't release Hannibal's neck. He's in the real world, Hannibal's walls high, and it's only his hammering pulse that tells Will he's seen far more than Hannibal would have ever had him know. His fingers are numb from the cold, and he has the brief thought that Abigail may likely wake to his empty bed and panic.

"You knew," Will murmurs.

"Was I not as desperate as you to be Seen, dear Will?" Hannibal wonders, and his breath plumes in a fluffy white cloud. "Did I not ask you at every step if you could *see* me yet?"

"You could have told me."

"You had to want it, first."

He opens his mouth to say something, but he's not sure what it is he's supposed to say. He feels the need, though, and he scrambles.

"If you wake Abigail, we can gain more ground that way," Hannibal suggests, and his walls are so seamless, so well done that Will has to study muddied eyes for a long time before he responds.

"Bring the car around," he replies, and he takes a step away, allowing Hannibal out of the corner of the vending machine he'd wedged him into.

It's not until he's walking away that Will gathers together enough words to ask, "Why didn't you stop me from trying to gut you?"

Hannibal pauses and considers the question for a moment. His smile is small but still discernible. "I've seen your Dreams. You don't want to kill me."

Will waits for him to round the corner to get the car before he goes to wake up Abigail.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience through that cliffhanger! After a lovely vacation with family, my husband is now starting his brand new job, too! Where his hours are changing, I think I'm going to find myself with more time to write as a result (he works 12 hour shifts now). Not to get anyone's hopes up, but I may be able to post far more frequently as a result! :)

You're all so wonderful and supportive, and I hope this lives up to the wait. Again, thank you!

The Unquiet Grave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23: The Unquiet Grave

Abigail doesn't fall asleep the way Will would have preferred her to. At his insistence, she'd woken up and gotten her things ready. At the expression on his face and the brusque nature of his voice, she accepted that they were leaving with Hannibal Lecter. At his exasperated grunt and shrug, she allowed that the car Dr. Lecter pulled up in was in no way, shape, or form the car he always drove. At his borderline parental tone at her hesitance, she plopped down in the back while Will drove and the doctor allowed the car-that-may-or-may-not be his to be commandeered.

Naturally, at his light suggestion ten miles into the drive that she lay back down and get some more shut-eye, she sat ramrod straight with legs criss-crossed in the middle of the back seat. Each time he glanced into the rearview mirror, he found her staring back. He hadn't spoken during much of their time since leaving the Great Red Dragon to his meal. After her reassurance that the injuries from the wreck were superficial at best, she'd remained quiet with her back to him on the spongy and suspiciously damp bed. From there she'd fallen to an exhausted sleep. If she hurts, she makes no comment. Only watches.

Hannibal sits with far more ease. He's content in the passenger seat to watch electric poles swing by in rapid fashion, the snow whipping by and blinding with each random flash of car lights in the distance. Will wonders if he'd slipped back around to grab the linoleum knife in order to get his revenge when Will least expects it.

I'm fond of you. Can you see?

Will envies his ease. Since he'd driven away from what had almost become his final resting place, ants marched along his skin and left vengeful rashes. Red Dragon with walls as high as mountains, Dolarhyde's decimated in his need to be Seen.

Pressed between the cold and the vending machines, Will had felt something powerful in how he'd been able to finally, finally see through Hannibal so easily, and yet...

Now, in the cramped space of the car, Will finds that he desperately wants to run. Run and run and run until his legs give out. He wouldn't get far; Will's pretty quite sure he couldn't get much more than a mile before falling into a ditch and letting the cold take him like Purnell likely will.

Will had let her do that. He'd shut his eyes and let her walk into the frigid night to die alone. Wandering the halls of his own mind palace, opening doors and peeking behind curtains, he's not quite sure if he can find the guilt he should be feeling right now. His body aches something awful, and bruises from the seatbelt had already formed in a striped fashion

across his chest and neck. Small cuts had dotted his shirt a suspicious pink where the belt broke skin. He hadn't noticed until taking a quick shower.

"So many questions you must have to remain so silent," Hannibal observes once they find their way to the interstate.

Plows had long already gone through to pave the way, semis keeping most of the falling snow at bay in the aftermath. Giants alongside their lone, nondescript car. He imagined each one as sentinel as they passed by.

"He's waiting for me to fall asleep-" Abigail says sweetly.

"Abigail-"

"I don't mind her hearing what I have to say," Hannibal assures him lightly, as though that's the only thing tying Will's lips into a knot. He looks away from the window, and Will avoids his stare.

"Why are you going on the run with us?" Abigail asks when Will still can't speak. "No one could have ever figured you out."

"You knew?" Will asks, stunned.

He glances in the rearview mirror, and it's her turn to avoid his stare. The air in the car reeks decidedly of onions and guilt, and he turns the ac on despite the cold outside in order to jog some awareness into his skin. There's something oddly exhausting about a near-death experience. He's not quite sure if he should let Hannibal take the wheel, though--that is, not quite sure if he can trust where they'd end up.

"He wanted...well, he wanted to know what I did to you after you left the hospital that day," she finally admits when Hannibal doesn't rise to her defense. He still sits as pleased as punch in the passenger seat, letting her squirm in the aftermath of the admission. "I didn't want to say anything, but he said he'd tell Agent Crawford."

"How'd you know?" Will directs this to Hannibal.

"How couldn't I know?" Hannibal objects.

"He has steel walls, so I didn't see him looking," Abigail explains quickly. Likely she's worried another emotional upset would lead Will to flipping the car into a ditch, and could he really be hurt by the thought? "He told me his secret after I told him mine."

"You kept her secret," Will murmurs.

Hannibal hummed an assent. "Your walls at that time...your Dreams of her couldn't help but spill out. I saw them when you looked into my eyes the first day we met, how the two of you had blended so seamlessly."

It's never occurred to him to think about what Hannibal had seen that first day, when Will still tossed and turned about the idea of whether or not he was truly alive or if he'd actually died

the day he murdered Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Storming away from that support group, throat burning with a wet pain, how must his dreams have seemed to someone like Hannibal?

"I felt it prudent to keep her secret as well as yours," he tacks on when Will doesn't speak.

"I wasn't trying to tack on more secrets," Will snaps.

"You're the one who taught him to weaponize his gift," Abigail accuses.

Hannibal is surprised. "Did you tell her about that?"

"He did it right in front of me at the bar!"

"What did you do at the bar?"

Will grinds his teeth and turns the heat back on, skin sufficiently numb and mind wide awake. "It wasn't intentional."

"It was intentional," Abigail corrects.

He flushes, but he reasons it's the sudden change in temperature in the car, that's all. "A guy wouldn't stop hassling us, so I told him to fuck off."

"He took one look at the guy, saw right through him, and stole his anger right from under him," she says, like divulging a secret. Will senses her urge to get the focus off of her own secrets, a child tattling. "Twisted the fear of everyone in the bar while doing it, too, in his quest to make the guy piss himself."

He hadn't realized he'd done that. Will fiddles with the radio dial.

"How did it feel?" Hannibal asks.

"I'm not in the mood to be psychoanalyzed right now," he warns.

"In the short time we've been apart, you've been busy."

Will wonders how cold Purnell must be by now--or is she already dead? It's too late to go back and see.

Hannibal seems to sense the way his thoughts leap, how despite the way he'd so easily walked into his mind palace, he was in no way as calm as he'd originally seemed. They pass a semi and fishtail modestly climbing the small snow piles between lanes. He takes Will's hand, the doeskin pair stark against Will's black leather. He doesn't press for more secrets.

Despite her warnings to the contrary, Abigail does fall asleep somewhere between nine o'clock and the next gas stop. Will Feels the air around them and can't quite sense any sudden feelings of recognition, a jolt of fear before a dash of adrenaline. He wonders how long before Jack has the dogs after him. They'll find another car soon, but from there what was the plan? How long until there was no cash? How long until Hannibal gutted him in retaliation?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Hannibal asks after they're on the road again.

"When you stopped being curious, why didn't you stop killing, too?" he asks after he gets a few sips of coffee in. He hasn't slept yet, but he can't quite bring himself to. In a cramped space, Will isn't so sure he wants to succumb to the stark reality of the nightmares that are sure to come.

"When you stopped being curious, why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't know if I could trust you," Will replies shortly.

"Precisely."

"Says the cannibalizing serial killer," he hisses, a glance to Abigail's prone form. Her head is kinked at a bad angle; she isn't going to wake up happy.

"How was I to know that the moment you found your RE you wouldn't run to Agent Crawford and immediately point your finger?" Hannibal says evenly. "Programmed from such a young age to only answer to *them*, how could I have predicted *you*?"

"You knew something, Will Graham," Red Dragon says coyly. Knowingly.

"I've kept secrets from them for a long time, Hannibal," he says softly.

Hannibal takes his time to think on that; his expression is placid in thought, fatigue apparent only in the lines around his mouth. "I imagine there is a reason the Great Red Dragon couldn't bring himself to devour you," he agrees after a time. "In fact, that would explain why you so seamlessly took control of him."

"He would have killed you for that," Will feels the need to inform him. He's not sure why.

"You wouldn't have let him," Hannibal replies easily.

Will is sure that if Red Dragon had tried that same act a few months ago, Will would have easily and incidentally let him, but thinking of that makes him think of the rabbit that hadn't hopped fast enough and how the meat tasted like terror.

"What is your end game, Hannibal?" he asks. He thinks of how intimate Hannibal's thoughts had been in the memory, how he'd wanted to touch Will as much as Will had wanted to touch him at that moment. He thinks to reach across and grab his hand, but he refrains. Now's not the right time.

"What do you mean?"

"I was leaving, regardless...you could have stayed. Nothing would have tied you to any crime. Crawford would have never found you."

"You walked into my private thoughts and still have to ask?"

Will scowls. "Are you going to keep slaughtering people and forcing me to Dream of how much pleasure you gained from it? Are you going to make me go through that again?"

Hannibal takes his time. The songs shift as a new DJ comes on, and Will enjoys half of a corny ballad before he admits, "I hadn't entirely planned to do what I did to you, either, Will."

"...What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"Any other empath would have fallen to a coma." Hannibal's incisor flashes as he bares his teeth; whether a grimace or a smile, Will can't tell. "Did it ever occur to you that your power is so potent and inherent that even while you Dreamed, you made reality things I meant as only fantasy that you occasionally dreamed, not something you thought you lived?"

Will lets a whole song and commercial go before he feels calm enough to say anything.

"I don't think you mean to sound like it's my fault I feel like I murdered your victims," he says, and God damn if it doesn't come out even and level-sounding.

"Not at all," Hannibal agrees readily, "I'm awed by how your mind creates things. You are utterly unique, but in that is the capability of true terror should you decide to use your gift for harm. Minds aren't meant to exchange memories in their entirety like that."

Will shudders, and the urge to reach across and take his hand shifts to a sudden need to strangle him. "Fuck you."

He thinks of how he'd read over the studies done on Hannibal. He once thought Hannibal was unique, too.

"I want you to see a route through my dreams," Hannibal suggests, a blunt and obvious detour. "If you choose to follow it, I believe you'll find my end game and something more." A brief smile, tantalizing and just as dangerous as a devil's.

Ah, but Will had just made peace with the Great, Red Dragon. He isn't feeling too afraid of a devil.

"Your walls are up, even while you sleep," he points out.

"You found the crack once. You'll find it again." Hannibal doesn't seem too worried about it, and he shifts to lean his seat back and close his eyes to sleep. It's a peculiar thing, seeing him so out of schedule to be sleeping in rumpled clothing in the late morning, and Will wonders just how many memories of his Hannibal 'accidentally' planted within his walls. He wonders if he should believe the things he'd said, that an E-3 could do such a thing.

Then again, Mr. Jackson may have a word or to on the matter, if he could remember anything.

"Hannibal," Will prompts after a few minutes.

"Yes?"

"I let him go." A beat. "Dolarhyde, I mean. I didn't kill him."

Will can't see his face, but he can hear his smile. "Of course you did, Agent Graham. You help people."

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When Will finally breaks, he presses bare fingers to Hannibal's left wrist, tucked under the glove he'd worn. Feeling for his walls now that he knows they are there is much easier, and among the feelings of REM, there is a sense of excitement and contentment.

He feels like a voyeur, Seeing while Hannibal sleeps. Still, the wall keeps him from whatever it is Hannibal is willing to share, as impenetrable as it ever was. Now that the offer is again presented, though, Will finds himself hungry to see. He wonders if it will be easy like before, as seamless as wanting to see Hannibal's secrets and then suddenly seeing them. There is something disconcerting about how easy it is to do it now that he knows how.

But Hannibal knew that, surely.

The crack in Hannibal's wall is Will, and he finds it with fingers trailing the crevices of the stonework, monkshood blooming where seeds land. Much like the case with Abigail, finding someone that wants to be found is far easier, and he puzzles over what it is Hannibal felt when he realized his curiosity had changed. Abject horror, and yet...puzzled acceptance. Curiouser and curiouser. He drags fingers over the feeling, something bemused and held with the same inspection as an estranged friend that suddenly shows up one day on your doorstep and expects a loan.

Hannibal is careful, even in his dreams. As a Dreamer, it seems that he is especially careful. The house Will plucks from Hannibal's head, waiting, is a modest Victorian style set just close enough to the woods for comfort. Will senses the ease of getaway, should it come to that. A driveway snakes the way only someone with money could make it, winding out in a black ribbon into the mouth of more trees. Surrounded, they may have a sense of safety out of the sight of prying eyes, and there's promise to how defensible they could make the stronghold--that is what Will Feels, studying the house Hannibal left for him in his Dream. A stronghold. A fortress. Some place to lay his secrets. Some place to lay his head. A home.

He takes the route as though he knows it, and maybe that is what Hannibal meant when he said he took his memories. Effortlessly, and all because Hannibal had simply allowed the opportunity.

Hannibal wasn't repulsed like others, though. The raw power of an E-3 excites him more than anything. Will can Feel that, too.

Abigail had woken up during the drive, but she wasn't much for conversation. He'd only tried asking about her wounds, but the response had been so violently sharp and curt he tabled that for another time. He isn't sure what all she witnessed that night from the crumpled safety of the car, and he isn't sure when he's going to find out. There's the very real the possibility she hates him for sparing Dolarhyde when he hadn't spared her father; he can't fix that if that's the case.

The tires eat miles of road. Will takes the exits and turns like he's done this a thousand times before.

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The house is abandoned when they arrive sometime late in the evening. Abigail had been the one swap out the cars for them, disappearing down an alley and appearing ten minutes later with a corolla as average as every other model. He'd wanted to ask, but she wasn't in the way of giving information just yet.

Will stands in the driveway even after the other two enter the house, more to stretch his legs than anything. The air feels lonely, the place maybe once loved but now forgotten. He inhales and watches windows light up in staggered time wherever a tired Abigail roams next. Likely to find a real bed to lay out on and count her wounds.

He wanders the driveway, the forest beyond swallowing up the asphalt tongue that winds to a street far off the beaten path. The sign at the end warns that it's a Private drive. Only this house rests on it, and the look on Hannibal's face when they'd arrived had been equal parts warming and unsettling. He thinks of the rabbit who had hopped too slow and swallows back the taste of it.

"You found it," Hannibal says, grabbing his attention. He walks down from the wraparound porch and makes his way over, his suit wrinkled from the constant travel while crammed into the car. He'd offered to drive or even pay for a hotel on more than one occasion, but Will had adamantly refused, his foot unmoving from the petal. Something wouldn't quite let him relinquish control.

"I did," Will agrees. He looks back to the winding driveway. "It isn't so hard when you know what to look for."

"Other empaths out of the eye of the government go their entire lives struggling to control what you make reality just by saying it," Hannibal says thoughtfully. "The moment you allowed yourself to learn it, you did. As easy as breathing. Natural."

"Hardly," Will retorts. He rubs the back of his neck, mildly uncomfortable with the praise.

Hannibal's lip quirks into a smile. "What do you think?"

"Of the house or of how many laws I've broken?" Will wonders. At Hannibal's inscrutable expression, he amends, "I think I'm going to fall on the first bed I find in there and not get up for a few days." He makes no move to go.

"Do you think I've laid a trap for you inside?" Hannibal asks lightly. "Or do you find the moon particularly beautiful this time of night?"

"I found you your house, Hannibal. I think I already fell into the trap."

His brows lift. "Oh?"

"Haven't I?" Will glances over at him, then laughs, exhausted, and rubs his face. There wasn't enough coffee in the world that could have gotten him much farther past this place. It was a good thing he'd looked into Hannibal's walls when he had. "You got me out here all alone. That was the goal, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Hannibal agrees after a considerable pause.

"So what's the next step in your plan, then? What do you do to me next?"

He's staring at the moon when he asks, so he's surprised when he's grabbed by the lapels of his coat. Before he can think to protest, he finds lips pressed against his own, but much like before there is a sense of separation, of Will kissing Hannibal and Hannibal distinctly kissing Will. Two people with want in their bones.

Unlike the last time, though, there is nothing to stop Will from indulging more, tongue dipping in to taste something he's sure should be forbidden. Gloved hands glide along Hannibal's back, pulling him closer as he can't help how horridly selfish he's being, how his lips taste like a future if Will could only open his eyes to See it.

When Hannibal takes his hand to guide him into the house and deeper still to a master bedroom whose furniture lays protected by thick, heavy sheets, Will lets him. He traces fingers on lips that buzz with the need for more.

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He sleeps for almost two days, and he Dreams walls that sprout Monkshood from the cracks, growing with wild abandon. The planters are overflowing with Thyme that makes the air ripe as he walks bare feet across it. In the field beyond, the Ravenstag watches.

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"Are we staying here?"

Abigail finally speaks to him the next day. In that time, Will has touched bare hands to the walls of the house, felt them as a place once known fondly as a home. He wonders if Hannibal lived there a long time ago, or if it is the abandoned home from one of his victims; he's not sure if he wants to ask. He's not sure he wants to risk breaking the picture-perfect setting.

"Hannibal is showing me how to control my Dreams to create barriers." He's sitting by the creek in the back part of the yard. The stone bench is cold on his ass, and he was just about to go inside before she'd found him. "He thinks he can teach me how to use my gift to project a reality."

"Like he did when he showed you his victims?" she asks sweetly.

"Like he does with his own mind so easily that he passes as a neurotypical with a quirk," Will returns, just as quick.

"So you think you can protect it?" Us, she wants to say. *So you think you can protect us?*

"Do you trust me to protect it?"

Abigail frowns, and she avoids his stare. She doesn't want him to see. "I saw your thoughts jumping around. Each time you looked in the rearview mirror, I saw something Hannibal Dreamed into your mind. Something he...made you see."

She'd kept Hannibal's first secret. She'd kept her father's secret. Would she keep secrets further still? Or would she try to leave?

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

Ice sits loose on the creek, weak gurgles between glazed rocks. Will stares at that rather than look at her. Guilt is as double-edged as his empathy, and he'll be grilling Hannibal later on how to safeguard her from finding those things.

"I almost saw you die, Will."

She throws her arms around him and surprises him, holding on tight as she burrows her face in his shoulder. Will hesitates, but it's only her hair that tickles his nose, relief coupled with a traumatized ripple down her spine. He hugs her back, awkward, and he thinks of how Hannibal's lips had tasted in the moonlight. Tempting. Dangerous. Yearning.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, too."

"No barriers helped when they were trying to dig into your head like that," she says into his neck. "Do you think his help can protect you from that, too?"

Will's dreams had run rampant for how agonizing that'd felt, crippled and on his knees as someone tried to rip past his barriers to the squishy brain beneath. He swallows thickly and nods.

"Yes...he can help with that.

She nods slowly, jerkily. "If you think you can keep us safe, we can stay here. I...I think I could like it here."

"He says it's...it's like a switch. Now that I reach for it, my power shows me. It feels natural, like...like breathing."

Abigail pulls away to look at him for a moment, but she doesn't look too troubled by what she sees. She only scrutinizes, brows knit beneath a thick, woolen cap. There was a giant bruise where her cheek had hit the dashboard--something that hadn't revealed itself until later.

"Your walls are high," she says, and she looks around them with a sort of wonder. "You make them seem as though they're all around us. Walls in your head, but...everywhere, too."

"Hannibal calls it projecting. He's studied things like this."

She nods and looks to the frozen creek, chewing on her lip. "Just... promise me we don't have to help."

They're one in the same, aren't they? Both of them survived Garret Jacob Hobbs. What one does, surely the other shall. Would Will help Hannibal, should he decide to kill again?

"I'm an empath. I can't eat meat."

They both laugh a beat too late, which then makes them laugh sincerely; he Feels something in the air, something like promise.

-

Jack Crawford isn't the Director of the EBAU for no reason. Will knows him to be a shrewd man, as calculating as he is aggressive. He'd first scoped Will out in middle school, observing in the classrooms occasionally as they taught. Will knew early on that he was under a lot of high expectations. He knew they watched him closely.

It's not quite two weeks when he finds his way onto their property, and Will knows it because he Feels it in snow he stands in barefoot. His walls Feel as though they stretch out to the vast space beyond, and he Sees Jack clearly walking through the trees, slinking with a sneaking purpose. No weapon is drawn, but that doesn't mean much.

"Hannibal," he murmurs, and he blinks, coming back to himself. Pulling away from the walls, from his 'projections' as Hannibal calls them, is mildly dizzying, and he takes slow, calming breaths until the world stops spinning. His feet are on fire from the cold. "Keep Abigail inside?"

Hannibal stands beside him with fur-lined slippers and towels tucked in his arms. He clears his throat, and his expression shifts just slightly. Although a strong Dreamer, he can't do nearly anything so powerful as what Will is learning to do. He's a good teacher, though. Knowledge sits ready at his fingertips, and each session they work together leaves Will with something more in his arsenal to better protect them.

"Do you mean to go alone?" he asks.

"I do." And by that he means without any killing, if he can swing it. Alone means he has a chance to not have to take that step, if he's paid attention at all these last few weeks. The pain in his feet grows, sharp now that his body knows he's fully conscious and present. He climbs from the snow, and he towels his feet off, shoving them into the slippers. The faster he walks the pain off, the better. Needles pinprick across every inch, teeth made for tearing.

Hannibal offers his arm, and Will hobbles inside with him to warm up. He Feels the forest on his skin, warning him that danger was coming.

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It's easy to find a man that wants to be found. That is what flits across Jack's mind as he stumbles across Will in a small clearing in the woods, a place Will liked to walk to in order to think by himself. He's had a lot of time to do that, between sessions with Hannibal. Thinking. Weighing. Assessing.

Will smiles grimly, and he holds a hand up in caution.

"Easy, Jack," he warns. "That's far enough."

"Will," Jack calls out, although his tone is hard to read. It's a mix of accusation and relief. Under it all, there's some part of Jack that cares for him still. A well-trained dog that made a mistake, only this mistake meant he'd have to put him down, wouldn't he?

"I'm not going back with you," he says pleasantly. "I'm hoping we can come to an agreement that leaves us both alive and happy, actually."

"You think that's a possibility?" Jack's incredulous, but only for a minute. He recovers well.

"I do."

"You have to come in, Will," Jack says wearily, and that initial relief is fast fading to something of flickering frustration. He'd carried a bite of resentment in the imprints of his boots in the snow. Will had made his life a bit difficult as of late. "You broke the law, and I know you've enough sense to know no one in there wants to hurt you."

"That's not quite true," he disagrees.

"Excuse me?"

"Kade Purnell tried to put a bullet in my head, and the only reason I lived is because Agent Dolarhyde got to her first." Will relishes the look of shock on his face. Something he'd tuck into his walls to bolster him later. A gut-punch, and it connects good. It spurs him to add, "I go in there, you going to put a bullet in my head, Jack?"

Jack gapes, and Will can See him so clearly, a neurotypical that was caught utterly unaware. Innocent, although ignorant. Kade Purnell may have used him, but his hands are clean where Will's life is concerned.

And yet...

"I just want your head on straight, Will," he says wearily, and he holds his hands out in supplication. He seems to sense that something has shifted, but he's not quite sure where yet. "You're not quite an RA, are you? Your head's on straight, I can see that. You'd passed your evaluation."

"Walk away from this place, and I won't hurt you, Jack," Will warns, and his voice darkens. "I don't want to hurt you."

The cold air sits sharp between them, biting in the silence. Their breaths ache for it. Jack's eyes narrow, and his stance shifts.

"What changed?" he asks. "Something changed when you followed that lead."

"You worried the killer got in my head?"

"I'm worried about somethin'."

Will thinks of the days following the murder of Garrett Jacob Hobbs; how Jack finally had to threaten him to go back, how maybe deep down Will had known that he shouldn't go back to work just yet. Only Jack had needed him, and he knew Will didn't want to disappoint.

"All the years you've known me and you still don't seem to realize that all I've ever wanted is to be left the hell alone," Will remarks. He looks away from Jack, to the clearing where he let his thoughts grow, where he let bare hands sink into cold snow to Feel the earth sleeping beneath.

He's coming down with a cold from all of the constant temperature fluctuations in the name of training, but it's worth it.

"I offered to leave you alone Will, and you didn't want to take it," Jack argues.

"Francis Dolarhyde urged the EBAU to allow me a 6-week break to get my head on right, and the request was denied," he returns. He doesn't look back to the man before him whose logical thought is slowly chipping away in the face of emotion. There isn't much reason to tell him these things. Maybe it's the vindication in seeing one strike after another tear at Jack's foundations with savage finesse. Will knew a lot about that. "Ironically enough, he then later lost his boundaries and gave to an alter Director Purnell knew about all along. The prescription issued to help him not anti-psychotics but sugar pills."

Jack stares.

"So, like I said before, if it's all the same to you I'd like to be left alone."

"If that's how you want to go out, then," he says. The cold enters his voice.

Will thinks his walls high, and he looks at Jack, into his eyes where secrets lie. He Sees him, each aspect of his character as his thoughts race but settle ultimately on justice, on law above all else. His hands reach for his gun. Will thinks them useless, and as he Dreams that reality into Jack's mind, Jack believes it to be so and drops his arms.

"This place haunts you because you will never find it," Will says, and his voice feels oddly loud in the brittle wood. Jack's silence in response makes his words sound all the more foolish, and yet within the Dreams unfolding in Jack's mind, they are real and they replace memories where he knew this place, where he'd found it and in doing so found Will.

"Should someone stumble some way towards it, you will deter them because it is not real, this place," he murmurs, and toe-to-toe with Jack he leans in to whisper in his ear. "Should this place become real again, you would defend it with your life, wouldn't you? Shouldn't you?"

Jack Dreams of his wife, how he'd do anything to protect her. He's nodding, and it's effortless because within his Dreams this would also protect her, wouldn't it? Protecting this place he did not know but would happily die for?

"Go. Take a long vacation alone and forget wherever it was you thought you found Will Graham." A pause. "Abigail Hobbs is dead, although you can't say why. How did she die? You'll never find out. They'll never believe you, and it will haunt you that you can't find her body."

The Dreams Will weaves become memory, and it's not so cruel as the Great Red Dragon when it's protecting him from a padded cage, is it? Jack Crawford nods against his cheek, memories already fading of the bread trail Jack took to find him, of how he'd ever come across that sleepy town that'd recognized the girl in the picture, and by-the-by just where *had* that Hobbs girl gone off to? Hadn't she disappeared? Why had he found evidence saying she'd been killed, then?

He has to find her...he has to regroup at the EBAU and start a manhunt for her. Somewhere south was the lead, wasn't it...? Somewhere south, and Zeller was going to get right on it once Jack was back at the EBAU...

Jack Crawford turns away from Will without truly seeing him, and he stumbles into the forest once more, hurrying towards the nearest town to fly home and begin the manhunt for Abigail. Abigail Hobbs was dead, and he'd die trying to find her.

It's not so cruel as what Red Dragon did to Kade Purnell, but Will still feels a stab of something like guilt when he does it to Jack. He stays in the clearing for a time after, letting ripples of the cold rip through him as though it absolves him of something.

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He reaches the house and finds Hannibal and Abigail in a cozy den, more welcoming now that the sheets had been removed from them. He's allowed his space, and he bypasses them to what seems to have been a man-cave in its prime. He sits on the edge of the leather chair and thinks of the one just like it in Garrett Jacob Hobbs home.

He supposes guilt is natural when you allow yourself to feel it. Of course it was necessary for him to deter Jack, but did he have to set him on a manhunt like that? One he'd never achieve? Red Dragon would have found it funny, probably. Hannibal would praise that it was a sign of his power.

It can be good and bad , Hannibal had acknowledged after one evening of practicing projection. Fighting against Hannibal's walls to breach them and work his way inside. With Hannibal resisting, it was actually...almost fun.

A secret he locks well behind his walls, thank you.

He could have just let him go on vacation and return with no memory. Will nods and chews on him thumb, thinking about that. He could have, but he didn't. Maybe there's as much resentment in Will as there was in Jack. The things he's had to do, the things he's had to fight through...

Just as there are alcoholics and then there are weekend-indulgers, there is equal capacity to allow the power it gives you to take over reason.

He'd told Jack he wasn't handling it well. He wasn't handling things at all, and what had it been? Jack needed him. Jack had always needed him. Will had always wanted to help, and Jack needed that.

Will Dreamt that Jack didn't need him anymore.

But to Dream yourself a palace? A place to live your life in peace? Tell me the harm in that.

He stands up, and the thought of dinner--vegetarian, Will insisted--sounds amazing. This place had once been a friend's, but they died of natural causes and had left it to him. No one knows of it, he promises. They'd been paranoid enough for that.

The grave at the back of the woods bears a name in Japanese. The grave is quiet and doesn't reveal dark secrets. Will often wonders, alone in the forest, if she was an empath, too.

This place could be your home, if you let it.

He reaches the den at the same time Hannibal is sliding a book back into its place on the shelf. His breath catches, and the thought comes again.

"Hungry?" Abigail asks, standing up. The bruising on her jaw is only now better on the edges.

"Starving," he says, watching Hannibal.

All you have to do is Dream it, then make it your reality.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are at the end...I think, from the very beginning of this fic even, the goal truly had been to try and find a place where Will have a home in peace to settle the racing thoughts in his head...I hope that in some way I was able to achieve that. I hope you enjoyed it, and it met your expectations in some degree. That's all a writer really can try to do, and for something that I enjoy writing so much, there can only ever be hope that it's what the reader needs it to be when they first decide to pick it up. :)

I think, honestly, since I've gotten married there's always been something that's delayed things or swept me into complications on delays. I'd wanted this one finished sooner and my new fic started by October, but once again things have come up, and my aunt has passed away. I'll be flying out for the memorial, but next Monday I'm going to post my newest fic for the Hannibal fandom --Opus Dei, the sequel to Magnum Opus.

For those following my writing lineup, there are really only two more confirmed fics that I have: Opus Dei, and the sequel to Where the Wicked Walk. After that, the sky is the limit. :)

Thank you all again. You have made this such a fun fandom to write in, and I can't wait to see what else is in store.

End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr as Elfnerdherder --come say hello!

A special thanks to my patrons: Sylarana, Duhaunt6, Mendacious Bean, Superlurk, Cecily, Evertonem, Inky-Starlight, Heather Feather, Laura G., and Dancy_85!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!